


5-31-2017

# Supplanting the Wrong with the Right: A Synoptic Overview of Christian and Islamic Reactions Towards the Subject of Heresy

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## Recommended Citation

Barnard, Brett G., "Supplanting the Wrong with the Right: A Synoptic Overview of Christian and Islamic Reactions Towards the Subject of Heresy" (2017). *Lawrence University Honors Projects*. 107.

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**Supplanting the Wrong with the Right:**  
A Synoptic Overview of Christian and Islamic Reactions Towards the  
Subject of Heresy

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Honors Project, Spring 2017  
IHRTLHC  
1 May 2017



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## General Introduction

### I. Islam: An Extant Christian “Heresy?”

Wherever there are genuine subscribers to creeds claiming to be the “one true religion,” orthodox authorities have made it apparent that there are malicious and sinister deviants guilty of spreading the worst degree of misinformation. In the case of Abrahamic belief systems such as Christianity or Islam, which maintain an insistence of religious exclusivism and absolute theological authority, this breed of opposition is more horrific to believers than any category of pagan, infidel, or apostate; this is the species commonly identified by the orthodoxy as the “heretic.” To most, the term “heresy” is not positive in nature. It probably calls to mind images of helpless religious minorities being dragged before some kangaroo court dressed up as a medieval church tribunal and accused of ludicrous blasphemies or sacrilegious crimes, wherein they are often threatened with the prospects of destitution, torture, or being burned at the stake should the “evidence” professing their guilt prove factual. While this imagery does possess some validity in the historical record, the truth towards the overall nature of “heresy,” and the reactions against it by Christian and Muslim orthodoxies, is nowhere near as simplistic.

Although Christianity and Islam share a common claim of being the solely authentic monotheistic faith as well as mutual scriptural canon and spiritual ancestry descending from Abraham, a comparison between their respective attitudes towards the “heretical” is essential since the concept is one that has defined the relationship between these two religions since their very inception. Such a comparison will make it apparent the exact reasons why these two faiths have each felt the need to enforce their own superiority, while discussing the egregious errors committed by their counterpart. This prominence of heresy within the relationship arose from the

fact that, in their own way, both Christianity and Islam are guilty of committing heresy against the other. In the case of the Christian faith, theologians such as St. John of Damascus (676-749 CE) classified Islam as a heresy that was no different than Gnosticism, Arianism, or any other pre-Nicene sect of Christianity whose beliefs had contrasted the developing orthodoxy. Most notably, within his work *On Heresies*, John of Damascus lists in detail numerous detractions from true Christian belief throughout the centuries, and while he never uses the term “Islam” or “Muslim,” he makes it clear that the “superstition of the Ishmaelites”<sup>1</sup> described below is in reference to the youngest of the three Abrahamic religions:

From that time to the present, a false prophet named Mohammad has appeared in their midst. This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous composition in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration.”<sup>2</sup>

As evidenced by the above passage, John of Damascus’ criticisms are directed towards questioning the origins and theological legitimacy of the youngest Abrahamic faith. The Syrian monastic and church father adamantly maintains the belief that these “Ishmaelites” had been deceived by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE), who not only appropriated whatever parts of Judeo-Christian scripture and theology suited him for the sake of spreading his own “heresy,” but also remained insistent on their new religion’s absolute legitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

Out of all the evidence cited by John of Damascus of Islam’s supposed “heresy” against Christianity, it is this reassurance that the Prophet Muhammad “conversed with an Arian monk,”

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<sup>1</sup> Saint John of Damascus, “On Heresies,” in *Writings*, translated by Frederic H. Chase Jr. (South Bend: Ex Fontibus Company, 2015), 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 154.

that stands out the most. “Arianism” specifically refers to a late third-early fourth century Christian heresy that was combatted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE for its denial of Christ’s divinity, holding to the belief that “the Son of God is a creature,” that “did not receive His soul from Mary but only His body.”<sup>4</sup> Since the Qur’an concurrently makes it clear that, “the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a man,” and to “stop [speaking of the Trinity]” as “God is only one God,”<sup>5</sup> it is easy to see where this comparison between Islam and the earlier Christian heresies could have arisen. While John of Damascus directly critiques Muslims for not needing witnesses for “[their] faith and [their] scriptures,”<sup>6</sup> and for calling Christians “associates” and “idolaters” (despite Islam’s perceived veneration of the Black Stone at Mecca),<sup>7</sup> he simultaneously asserts that the heresies he mentions “amount to but a hundred all together,” with “all the rest” coming from them.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the fact that a subscriber to an earlier pre-Nicene heresy confirmed Muhammad’s own prophetic status all but guarantees Islam’s own status as heretical.

While the claims made by St. John of Damascus might come off as one critic’s attempts at discrediting a rival religion, his arguments are not entirely without precedent. After all, various passages from the Qur’an contradict the Tanakh and the New Testament, sometimes being more in line with the “apocryphal” and the “heretical” accounts than their “canonical” counterparts. One notable example is in reference to one of Christ’s miracles within the Qur’an, where he “fashioned the shape of a bird out of clay,” and “breathed into it,”<sup>9</sup> thereby causing it to “become a real bird.”<sup>10</sup> This story is almost identical to an excerpt taken from the non-canonical Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>5</sup> The Qur’an, 4:171.

<sup>6</sup> St. John of Damascus, “On Heresies,” 155.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 155-156.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>9</sup> The Qur’an, 5:110.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3:49.



text known as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. 125 CE)<sup>11</sup>, wherein the five-year old Jesus “made some soft mud and fashioned twelve sparrows,”<sup>12</sup> that then “took flight and went off chirping”<sup>13</sup> once he clapped his hands and commanded them to do so.

Despite the fact that this text was penned relatively early in Christian history and may have even been indirectly quoted by St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 CE) as “a false and wicked story” among “an unspeakable number of apocryphal and spurious writings,” that serve to “bewilder the minds of foolish men,”<sup>14</sup> this scriptural consistency with the Qur’an suggests that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* was never explicitly declared “heretical,” at least not as directly as other non-canonical gospels, such as those discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945. J. K. Elliott’s observation that the superscriptions within surviving manuscripts almost always refer to the text as *paidika* (“childhood events”) rather than a “gospel” suggests that the unknown author was deliberately attempting to “differentiate these stories from the full ‘biographical canonical Gospels’”<sup>15</sup> present within the New Testament. This theological consistency is in no way limited to any singular apocryphal text. Further Quranic parallels occur within works such as the *Infancy Gospel (Protoevangelium) of James* (c. 145 CE)<sup>16</sup> and the Arabic (Syriac) *Infancy Gospel* (c. late fifth-early sixth century CE):<sup>17</sup> the newborn Christ child speaks to those witnessing his birth, providing them with, “salvation and joy,”<sup>18</sup> while confirming that he is indeed, “the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father

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<sup>11</sup> Bart D. Ehrman ed., “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

<sup>12</sup> Ehrman ed., “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:2,” 127.

<sup>13</sup> Ehrman ed., “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:4,” 128.

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Pickerington: Beloved Publishing, 2015), 1.20.1; J. K. Elliott ed., “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 77.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Robert J. Miller, “The Infancy Gospel of James,” in *The Complete Gospels: The Scholar’s Version* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 1992), 362-363.

<sup>17</sup> Elliott ed., “The Arabic Infancy Gospel,” in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Ehrman ed., “The Proto-Gospel of James 20:3,” in *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70.

has sent me for the salvation of the world.”<sup>19</sup> These events evenly parallel his Quranic defense of the Virgin Mary’s accused “infidelity” in *surah* 19 (Maryam), and the prophetic confirmation that follows:

[Jesus] said: ‘I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet; made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless. Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.’ Such was Jesus, son of Mary.<sup>20</sup>

While the acts performed by the Jesus within this text could just as easily be in reference to God’s creation of Adam in the Old Testament, wherein He “formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,”<sup>21</sup> the parallels it possesses with the Qur’an are, at the least, rather noteworthy. With that in mind, this belief that “all the rest [of the heresies]” descend from their predecessors supports Bart Ehrman’s argument that certain non-canonical Christian accounts (such as the infancy gospels) remained extant as “speculative and entertaining stories of the youthful Son of God,”<sup>22</sup> long after the codification of the New Testament; long enough to have been adopted by the “Seal of the Prophets” during the composition of the Qur’an.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of where these clear areas of scriptural consistency arose, reviewing this erroneous, yet understandable, classification of Islam as a Christian heresy becomes crucial when comprehending the general Islamic view towards the concept of heresy itself, and how it could

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<sup>19</sup> The Gnostic Society, “The Arabic Infancy Gospel of the Savior 1:2,” *The Gnosis Archive*, [gnosis.org](http://gnosis.org/library/infarab.htm), <http://gnosis.org/library/infarab.htm>, (accessed April 7, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> The Qur’an, 19:30-33.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 2:7 (NRSV).

<sup>22</sup> Ehrman, “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” 127.

<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, similar infancy narratives such as the *Infancy Gospel (Protoevangelium) of James* were popular enough in to have “played a significant role in pictorial art of the Middle Ages” (Ehrman ed., “The Proto-Gospel of James,” in *Lost Scriptures*, 63). This all but confirms the aforementioned presumption that certain apocryphal books of the New Testament remained in circulation long after the establishment of an absolute scriptural canon and were still, to a degree, considered acceptable for orthodox Christians to read.

just as easily be applied towards the Christian religion. With passages from various *surahs* making it clear that, “it would not befit God to have a child,”<sup>24</sup> and identifying “those who say, ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary,’”<sup>25</sup> and “those who say God is the third of three,”<sup>26</sup> as having “defied the truth,”<sup>27</sup> it would seem that the Qur’an (and, by extension, Islam) almost always favors apocryphal Christian beliefs over their canonical equivalents. This in turn suggests that, just as how Islam was a Christian “heresy” in the eyes of St. John of Damascus, orthodox Christianity is essentially guilty of being a heresy of sorts against Islam.

## **II. What Makes “Heretics” Guilty of “Heresy?”**

When reviewing the broader concept of “heresy” and those accused of being “heretics,” what is perhaps the greatest oddity of all is the rather vague nature of its overall application. Despite the universal agreement of “orthodox” clerics and theologians towards the horrific moral and spiritual nature of unrepentant “heretics” (and the emphasis made towards the necessity of their theological opposition and subsequent return to mainstream belief), the exact categorization is anything but universal, especially when contrasting the respective Christian and Muslim mindsets. For the former, the attitude expressed towards the heretical is very straightforward, especially in the case of long-standing and heavily organized denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church. Summarizations of doctrine within the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* help make the definition quite clear:

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<sup>24</sup> The Qur’an, 19:35.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 5:17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 5:73.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 5:17; 5:73.

*Heresy* is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth, which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same.<sup>28</sup>

After reviewing this statement, the definition of “heresy” (at least through Catholic eyes) becomes much easier to identify. Within the orthodox Christian viewpoint, “heresy” is not some blanket term for all religious beliefs, Christian or otherwise, that seek to challenge the one true faith. It is instead the consensual denial of true doctrine and the presentation of falsehood by those who are already part of the belief system: those who have already been baptized and are more than aware of the proper theological mindset, yet consensually embrace fraudulent views, while holding them to be factual.

Despite the clear and concise nature of such a definition within Christianity, there is still some ambiguity when reviewing the respective Islamic stance towards the heresy. The Qur’an states that, “True Religion in God’s eyes is *islam*,”<sup>29</sup> makes it quite clear that the faith preached by the Prophet Muhammad has been “perfected,”<sup>30</sup> by God, and condemns those who “divide their religion into sects.”<sup>31</sup> That being said, it simultaneously stresses that “there is no compulsion in religion,”<sup>32</sup> and recognizes a limited place for at least some pre-Islamic monotheistic religions,<sup>33</sup> thereby implying that a certain amount of divergence in belief is perfectly acceptable, if not favorable. Furthermore, Islam is completely lacking in unified clerical or theological authority, making it all but impossible for there to be any sort of formal uprooting and confrontation of movements considered to have too greatly deviated away from the mainstream. As a result, there is still a considerable degree of ambiguity towards the Islamic

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<sup>28</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2089, *The Holy See*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c1a1.htm), (accessed March 31, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> The Qur’an, 3:19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 5:4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 30:32.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 2:256.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 2:62; 5:69; 22:17.

identification and suppression of heretics. Such ambiguity makes it clear that the Islamic view of the heretical is in no way synonymous with its Christian equivalent.

Owing to this respective precision and vagueness of heresy, this study shall seek to answer the following question: why it is that Christianity and Islam, two monotheistic belief systems that share a common prophetic ancestry, scriptural heritage, and claims of exclusive theological validity, differ so greatly when confronting those offshoots considered to be heretical, with the former going out of its way to identify and suppress the various “heresies” that have cropped up throughout history, and the latter not even possessing an equivalent term? In order to understand the reasons for such a prominent contrast, this study shall independently analyze the respective Christian and Muslim attitudes towards the subject of heresy. Such a synoptic overview will provide greater insight into the ways that two belief systems, which share so much historically and theologically, are able to differ so greatly towards the presented topic, and consequently, how it has affected the relationship that the two younger Abrahamic religions have held with one another.

When reviewing Christian reactions towards the “heretical,” such a broad overview is easier said than done, owing to plethora of alternative belief systems present in the religion. Therefore, this study shall direct all efforts towards the early orthodox Christian reactions against Gnosticism, a broad category of second century faiths that combatted the “proto-orthodoxy” in both organization and theology in the years prior to the religion’s legalization and the development of the Nicene Creed. Such an analysis of this “heretical” theology and the “proto-orthodoxy’s” response will allow for a critical understanding of how these “heresies” directly assisted in the doctrinal development of the “orthodoxy.” Instead of rebelling and seceding from the “proto-orthodoxy,” it was the existence of these “heresies” that allowed the latter to refine its

own theological mindset. The resulting argument is that, following the development and passage of the Nicene Creed in 325 CE, the most notable aspect of the Gnostic heretics was the manner in which they were demoted by a now state sanctioned church authority, descending from rivals of equitable standing to irritants that were easily suppressible by a “holy catholic and apostolic church” now in possession of near limitless spheres of state sanctioned theological influence.

When reviewing Islam's stance towards “heresy” an area of complication arises from the fact that there is no exact term for such. After determining the closest equivalent, it becomes clear that the Islamic view towards confronting heresy refers to the prevention of deviations from the “orthodox” mindset, while ensuring that the “religion of Truth”<sup>34</sup> reins supreme over erroneous predecessors. Although earlier faiths such as Judaism and Christianity are recognized as semi-legitimate, the Qur’an accuses them of having consensually “defied God,”<sup>35</sup> and of adopting false doctrines, making them guilty of what shall be referred to as “reverse-heresy.” Although both of these religions were practiced well before the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad, this is to say that they are viewed as having broken away from the religion of Abraham in favor of adding their own innovations and falsehoods, thereby committing a heresy that, rather than occurring in response to the teachings of the Prophet, necessitated his arrival in the first place. While never explicitly defined as such, this guilty verdict of Judeo-Christian “reverse-heresies” is supported by theologians such as ‘Abd al-Jabbar (935-1025 CE) whose work defines Christians as the “party of innovation” that “prevailed over the party of truth,”<sup>36</sup> spread numerous falsehoods<sup>37</sup> and met “whenever they want to permit or forbid something” on

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 9:33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 5:72.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar, *Critique of Christian Origins: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, edited, translated, and annotated by Gabriel Said Reynolds and Samir Khalil Samir (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 3.50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 3.874-913.

their own accord rather than the Divine's.<sup>38</sup> With these points in mind, this section of the project argues that, because of the “reverse-heresies” committed by the *dhimmah*, Islam has had to discipline its predecessors for their wrongdoing, while ensuring that Muslims themselves do not succumb to similar theological blunders.

In a world where the freedom to practice any religion one sees fit is considered a basic human right, wherein there sometimes seem to be too many faiths and denominations to count, what always stood out to me throughout the course of my studies was just how recent of a concept this seemed to be, not only between differing belief systems, but within individual religions themselves. Even after making a claim of being the “one true religion” and establishing theological dominance over the region, belief systems such as Christianity or Islam have always had to simultaneously ensure that the views of the believers themselves possess consistency as well as some degree of universal doctrinal conformity. Indeed, it would seem that a threat that almost always arises within those faiths claiming to be the true religion, even more so than any rival theology, are those divergences in belief described as “heresies.” Through analyzing a variety of primary sources within both belief systems, be they “canonical,” “apocryphal,” or “heretical,” I make the argument that the overall concept of heresy was never set in stone since the inception of these two religions. Rather, it was something which was had developed as a means for the orthodoxy to make the distinction between “proper” belief and that which presented a danger to the stability of their faith.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 3.386.

**Supplanting the Wrong with the Right: The “Canonical” Demotion and Suppression of  
“Heretical” Competitors in the Early Christian World**

**I. Introduction**

The development of the Christian faith from what began as a small Judaic offshoot into the largest extant religion on the planet was by no means an easy evolution. Apart from dealing with more than three centuries of intermittent persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, intense rejections from their Jewish contemporaries, and various struggles with attempted conversions of Gentiles, early Christians suffered from what can only be described as a painfully blatant lack of theological unity. Rather than develop an established and universal doctrine in the period immediately following the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, those who identified as “Christians” were divided into a multitude of camps, with a formal creed not being finalized until well after the religion’s legalization via Constantine I’s (274-337 CE) passage of the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. The problematic nature of this division stemmed from the intensity of disagreement occurring between two categories of pre-Nicene (325 CE) Christians: those whom historians of religion have classified as following the “proto-orthodox” creed, versus any and all rival schools of religiosity that had been pejoratively labeled “heretics.”

In contrast with what was often presented through the traditional viewpoint, early Christianity was incredibly varied and represented a vast multitude of belief systems, rather than any singular or “universal” church that was being irritated by small offshoots of self-righteous “heretics.” Etymologically stemming from the Greek *haíresis* (“to choose”),<sup>39</sup> that which would become “heresy” in this early Christian world was just as complex as this aforementioned

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<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2011), 4.



theological diversity. In the words of early Christian apologists such as Tertullian (160-220 CE), “heresy” literally referred to, “the sense of choice which a man exercises either to establish [false doctrines] or adopt them.”<sup>40</sup> It was this emphasis on the universally consensual nature of such practices that generated their colossal theological danger to the early church. Rather than rejecting Christ in favor of superstitions and idolatry (i.e., pagans) or ignorantly following beliefs that were dogmatically flawed and incorrect, the heretic was one who knowingly and willingly subscribed to erroneous doctrine, even after being informed of the correct alternative; one whose attacks against the church, “are no less intense than the persecutions Antichrist will employ in later days.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, rather than define any singular religious belief or movement that directly challenged the ethereal validity of what perceived itself as the universal and “orthodox” church, “heresy” was instead a catchall term that could be used in reference to any and all Christian movements that were prideful enough to oppose that which had professed itself as the solely authentic and original outlook, be it Gnosticism, Pelagianism, Docetism, Arianism, or numerous others.<sup>42</sup> These views were notoriously double-sided; in the eyes of many a heretic, these self-identifying “orthodox” Christians were just as guilty of the abhorrent “heresy” of which they themselves had been accused.

As established by primary sources from this early period of Christian history, and later scholarship, there was no universal viewpoint as to what constituted a “heretic,” just as how, until the formation of the Nicene Creed in the fourth century CE, there was no universal viewpoint as to what constituted a “Christian.” This ambiguity would not remain static. While there had been debate between early Christian sects as to which movement possessed genuine

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<sup>40</sup> Tertullian, “An Injunction Against Heresies,” in *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe*, edited by Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 4.

theological validity, the faith's legalization by Constantine, its promotion to the state religion of the Roman Empire by Theodosius I (347-395 CE) in 380 CE, and the doctrine of "one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,"<sup>43</sup> developed by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE meant that any degree of equivalence between these sects had reached its absolute apex, with any and all "heretics and schismatics," being "alien to these privileges," and, being "bound and subjected," to punishment should they see fit to continue with their dissensions.<sup>44</sup> Following the establishment of the Nicene Creed, the most notable aspect demonstrated by these early "heresies" was the rapid decline they underwent, specifically because the nearly contemporaneous formation of an absolute religious canon initiated their devolution from beliefs of equitable challenge against the "orthodoxy," into fringe movements that could easily be uprooted and suppressed by a church that was now in possession of near-limitless spheres of influence academically, politically, and theologically.

In order to understand the manner in which these early legitimate rivals of what would become Nicene Christianity deteriorated into so-called "heresies," which, in turn, deteriorated into critically endangered irritants that could be exposed, combatted, and stamped out, a detailed analysis of the theological differences between these heretics and their proto-orthodox cousins is necessary, so as to understand the manner in which the development of the latter was assisted by classification of the former. As is the case with "canonical" Christian denominations, the primary points of "heretical" theology can be found through the study and analysis of primary sources such as their sacred texts. However, as a result of the doctrinal conformity mandated by the victorious proto-orthodox movement, the enforcement of the Nicene Creed, and the now state-

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<sup>43</sup> Peters ed., "The Creed of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381)" in *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Peters ed., "Compelle Intrare: The Coercion of Heretics in the Theodosian Code, 438," in *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe*, 44-45.

sanctioned intolerance towards heresies, many such scriptures have been destroyed or irretrievably lost to the ages, with the majority of surviving examples either being fragmented or just as divisive as their represented belief systems. Fortunately, extant sources such the Nag Hammadi codices recovered in Upper Egypt in 1945 contain a number of partially intact “gnostic” gospels and other heretical texts. Interestingly enough, these “gnostic” gospels align with their proto-orthodox cousins almost as much as they contrast.

The reward gained via a detailed textual analysis of these “gnostic” gospels and other surviving “heretical” texts is twofold. Not only does it provide an opportunity to understand, via primary sources, the areas in which the proto-orthodox Christian movement theologically differed from their “heretical” oppositions; it allows for a deeper academic comprehension of what beliefs the “heretical” Gnostics and the “orthodox” Christians mutually agreed upon and were willing to share with one another. Rather than be limited to one or two examples, these points of agreement between the canonical and the heretical were surprisingly frequent. After observing these points of agreement, the opportunity presents itself for an analysis of the manner in which these early Christian movements differed: disagreements towards the exact celestial rank and nature of Christ, the attitude held by the Almighty towards the nature of the physical world, the exact requirements for church membership, the status of clerical authorities, and numerous others. After the analysis of such points of agreement and contention has been performed, it will be possible to truly understand the reasons that pre-Nicene proto-orthodox officials such as St. Ignatius of Antioch (35-108 CE), St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 CE) and Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 CE) had for attacking movements that they perceived as being heretical, and how such intense attacks directly contributed to the development of absolutely “orthodox” Christian doctrine.

This analysis of the reactions and responses that proto-orthodox church fathers had towards the “heresies” that opposed them will serve to emphasize a vital point of understanding. Rather than being the result of some minor cases of religious dissension or prideful movements that had broken away from the original church’s doctrine and creed, the “heretics” were, in fact, indirectly responsible for the formation of such doctrine in their own right. Instead of heresies coming about as acts of rebellion against the original Christian tradition, it was the “canonical” doctrine that came together as a response to heresies. This is to say that the doctrine of the Christian “orthodoxy” developed in reaction to movements perceived as “heretical,” as a means of both guaranteeing their theological segregation and assisting in the establishment of absolute “orthodox” authority. Such a proposal is supported by Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, who argues that, “‘heresy’ is an artificial category designed by authorities who regarded themselves by definition as ‘orthodox’ or ‘not-heretic.’”<sup>45</sup> Rather than a singular absolute church there were instead numerous different sects, all in contention with one another, each putting forth their own claims of being the genuine Christian tradition. Following Constantine’s legalization of the faith, the development of the Nicene Creed partially came about as a means of drawing upon prior condemnations made towards the movements that had been deemed “heretical” so as to guarantee their theological segregation from what would henceforth be considered the one true church. This habit of theological disapproval and condemnation established a finite strategy for the subsequent exposure and exclusion of “heretical” movements and their reintroduction to proper Christian belief, which in turn served as a basis for the routing of any and all future “heresies” that were revived (or had developed on their own accord) in the centuries to come.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

It was only through the written works of such “orthodox” opposition that any exact details of “heretical” theology and belief were known prior to the discoveries made at Nag Hammadi (as well as smaller finds made elsewhere in Egypt during the latter half of the nineteenth century).<sup>47</sup> The significance of such discoveries to the academic study of early church history is monumental. As discussed by historians of religion such as Bart D. Ehrman, such finds are so greatly significant not because they uncover some lost secret about early Christian belief or challenged the validity of already established doctrines. Their importance comes from the fact that, despite universal agreement amongst both religious and secular historians that none of the texts in the Nag Hammadi library are “authentic” in their claims as originating during the time of Christ,<sup>48</sup> they provide first-hand accounts of various “heretical” beliefs, such as those of the Gnostics, a dualistic movement described by Jeffrey Burton Russell as being, “the greatest difficulty the Christians faced”<sup>49</sup> during the earlier centuries of their religion’s existence. While the manuscripts date from the latter half of the fourth century CE, and some of the contents can be traced to earlier periods,<sup>50</sup> they still succeed in providing academics with primary sources that are relatively free of “proto-orthodox” critique, while simultaneously demonstrating the intense multiplicity that defined Christian belief prior to the establishment of the universal church.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, despite the natural opposition that the proto-orthodox church fathers would have held towards the study and existence of such texts, it would be inaccurate for scholarship to assume that these opponents saw to the complete eradication of heretical knowledge when establishing their own theological supremacy, both in theory and in practice.

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<sup>47</sup> Marvin Meyer and Elaine H. Pagels, “Introduction,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2007), 2.

<sup>48</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell and Douglas W. Lumsden, *A History of Medieval Christianity: Prophecy and Order* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000), 18.

<sup>50</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 54.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 4; 53.

Quite to the contrary, early church fathers such as Eusebius were quick to list in detail writings which, “according to the tradition of the Church are true, genuine, and recognized,” as well as hesitantly discuss works of debatable authenticity, and, most importantly, condemn those, “published by heretics under the name of the apostles, as containing either Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Matthias, and several others besides these.”<sup>52</sup> The intensity of these condemnations stem from the fact that not only do the heretics possess forged scriptures, they go so far as to falsely (and knowingly) attribute their writings to Christ’s genuine Apostles so as to increase their counterfeit validity.<sup>53</sup> While the early church fathers were only willing to give brief summaries of the contents of “heretical” texts, the commentaries and critiques of these proto-orthodox apologists served to provide academia with some idea of what to expect prior to the discovery of legitimate primary sources. In the same sense, when certain extant heretical works are compared to their canonical relatives, it becomes apparent that blithely accusing the “heretics” of rejecting the entirety of “orthodox” theology would be just as erroneous.

## **II. Canonical Consistency within the Non-Canonical *Gospel of Thomas***

When the works cited by Eusebius as being the toxic fiction of heretics are directly compared to extant recoveries that share the same titles, it becomes apparent that the theological consistencies and contrasts between these two collections of scripture are not nearly as agreeable, or as divisive, as initially suggested, with one of the most apparent examples being the text known as the *Gospel of Thomas*. Described by Ehrman as “the single most important non-canonical book yet to be uncovered,”<sup>54</sup> part of the significance of the gospel attributed to

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<sup>52</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson, ed. Andrew Louth (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 3.25.1-2; 3.25.6.

<sup>53</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 204.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

Didymus “Judas”-Thomas is the similarities it has with both its “heretical” siblings and its “canonical” cousins, while most other “gnostic” and non-canonical gospels, epistles, and treatises only contain small snippets of “orthodox” doctrine and theology. While there are several existing “heretical” works that have been attributed to this particular apostle, secondary scholarship helps determine the *Gospel of Thomas* that was discovered at Nag Hammadi as being one of the most critical when it comes to accurately understanding any areas of strong theological consistency that existed between the “heretical” movements within early Christianity and their proto-orthodox accusers.

Unlike other examples taken from the Nag Hammadi library, the *Gospel of Thomas* is neither entirely agreeable with its fellows, nor its opponents. Defined by academics as a “sayings gospel” (in contrast to the chronological linear narratives utilized by the Synoptic Gospels and John),<sup>55</sup> the *Gospel of Thomas* does not cover Jesus’ virgin birth, nor his crucifixion, nor his resurrection,<sup>56</sup> can be hypothetically dated rather closely to the accepted development of the canonical gospels (c. late first-early second century CE),<sup>57</sup> was prominent enough to have not only been mentioned by Eusebius, but directly paraphrased and cited by St. Hippolytus of Rome (170-235 CE) as a heresy that had “for many years, escaped notice,”<sup>58</sup> and, perhaps most notably, does not portray Jesus Christ as being the exclusive Son of God, but rather an utterer of wise sayings.<sup>59</sup> Despite these clear contrasts, a detailed textual analysis and the commentary of historian of religion Marvin Meyer makes it clear that, “the *Gospel of Thomas* is not fundamentally dependent on the New Testament Gospels,” nor is it an explicitly “Gnostic” work;

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<sup>55</sup> Miller, “The Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Complete Gospels*, 279.

<sup>56</sup> William Barnstone and Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Gnostic Bible*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 2003), 43.

<sup>57</sup> Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 136.

<sup>58</sup> Hippolytus, “Refutation of All Heresies 5.7.20,” *New Advent: Fathers of the Church*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050105.htm> (accessed April 21, 2017).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

it is instead, “an independent gospel and primary source,” that can be viewed as something of a point of theological fluctuation between the strictly “orthodox” beliefs and those held by their “heretical” opposition.<sup>60</sup>

Points of agreement between this, “independent primary source,” and the canonical gospels are present throughout the *Gospel of Thomas*, with over half of the gospel’s “sayings” (“79 out of 114, by one count”)<sup>61</sup> being direct quotes borrowed from its earlier “orthodox” cousins. Such instances of scriptural congruency are present throughout the “Synoptic Gospels” (i.e. Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as well as the Gospel of John (to a lesser extent) and “gnostic” gospels such as *Thomas*. Among countless examples, some of those that stand out the most to a reader familiar with the canonical books of the New Testament include Jesus’ statement that, “what goes into your mouth will not defile you; rather, it is that which comes out of your mouth that will defile you,”<sup>62</sup> the Parable of the Mustard Seed,<sup>63</sup> his proclamation that, “whomever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either on earth or in heaven,”<sup>64</sup> his claims that, “a prophet is not welcome in his own hometown,”<sup>65</sup> and his prohibition against the disciples “throwing pearls before swine.”<sup>66</sup> Since these areas of textual symmetry are present in the complete Coptic Egyptian manuscript (discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945) and the earlier Greek fragments (discovered amongst the Oxyrhynchus Papyri in 1897),<sup>67</sup> it would be more than reasonable to presume that the shared material between this “gnostic” gospel and its canonical

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 55.

<sup>62</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 14:5,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 141; Matthew 15:11; Mark 7:15 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>63</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 20:2-4,” 142; Mt. 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19 (NRSV).

<sup>64</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 44:1-3,” 145; Mt. 12:31-32; Mk. 3:28-29; Lk. 12:10 (NRSV).

<sup>65</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 31:1,” 143; Mt. 13:57; Mk. 6:4; Lk. 4:23-24; John 4:44 (NRSV).

<sup>66</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 93:2,” 151; Mt. 7:6 (NRSV).

<sup>67</sup> Miller, “The Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Complete Gospels*, 279; Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 136.



predecessors was present since the point of inception, rather than having been the result of later edits, rewrites, or retranslations.<sup>68</sup>

These textual symmetries between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the canonical New Testament are not exclusive to the Gospels. Apart from verses lifted from the Synoptic Gospels (both paraphrased and direct) and shared literary themes (i.e. agreements towards the invisible nature of the Kingdom of God,<sup>69</sup> a certain degree of favoritism shown by Jesus towards certain disciples over others,<sup>70</sup> etc.) several of Christ's "sayings" within the *Gospel of Thomas* bring to mind other books from the standardized New Testament, the most notable of which being the Pauline Epistles. Even though these references are not nearly as frequent as the "sayings" that have been borrowed from the Synoptic Gospels, they still possess a considerable presence, with one of the most apparent examples being Jesus' teaching towards his disciples that, "true circumcision in spirit has become valuable in every respect."<sup>71</sup> Although the inclusion of an apparent Pauline quote might seem anachronistic, and subsequently problematic, its presence helps support the notion of there being something of a sense, however minor, of theological consistency existing between the developing "proto-orthodox" Christian movement and certain "heretics," consistency whose textual presence might not have been as apparent otherwise.

This verse within the *Gospel of Thomas* demonstrates a sense of theological unity between the early "orthodoxy" and early "heresies," despite the clear anachronism occurring within. Said anachronism stems from the fact that this quote is taken from Paul's Letter to the Romans, a text that, while canonical and written rather early in church history (c. 57-58 CE),<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Meyer ed., "The Gospel of Thomas 31:1-2," 142; Meyer, ed., "The Greek Gospel of Thomas 31:1-2," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 155; Mt. 13:57; Mk. 6:4; Lk. 4:24; Jn 4:44 (NRSV).

<sup>69</sup> Meyer ed., "The Gospel of Thomas 51:2," 146; Lk. 17:20-21 (NRSV).

<sup>70</sup> Meyer ed., "The Gospel of Thomas 12:1-13:4," 141; Mt. 10:1; Mk. 6:8; Lk. 9:3; Jn. 13:23 (NRSV).

<sup>71</sup> Meyer ed., "The Gospel of Thomas 53:3," 146; Romans 2:25-29 (NRSV).

<sup>72</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 3.

refers to events that occurred after the Resurrection and Ascension, which the living Jesus would, naturally, have had no context for. This tardiness is a result of the fact that such deviations from the physical commandments of the Mosaic Law (such as circumcision) did not occur until the Twelve Apostles began serious attempts at converting Gentiles (i.e. after the Messiah's Ascension and the rejection of his message by mainstream Pharisaic Judaism). Subsequently, the likelihood of this gospel's authenticity is incredibly remote. Although this apparently anachronistic reference might have helped "orthodox" critics question the gospel's historical accuracy (by proving that the author was neither one of the Apostles, nor Jesus' supposed "twin" Didymus Judas-Thomas), its presence supports the existence of at least some theological agreement occurring between the self-proclaimed "orthodox" Christians and their "heretical" opponents, stemming beyond the mere borrowing of Messianic sayings from one another's sacred texts. While excerpts taken from later gnostic gospels, such as the *Gospel of Philip* (c. late second-early third century CE)<sup>73</sup> or the *Gospel of Judas*<sup>74</sup> (c. mid-second century CE),<sup>75</sup> share some of these points of agreement with their "canonical" siblings (i.e. Jesus' commanding his disciples to, "go into your room, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father who is in secret,"<sup>76</sup> a paraphrased summary of the Parable of the Sower,<sup>77</sup> etc.), these references are not nearly as apparent as those presented within the *Gospel of Thomas*.

In spite of such instances of agreement (as so far as it relates to certain shared sayings attributed to Christ, or the appropriation of scriptural teachings from one movement by another),

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<sup>73</sup> Madeleine Scopello and Meyer, "The Gospel of Philip," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 160.

<sup>74</sup> Rather than having been discovered amongst the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, the *Gospel of Judas* was found within the *Codex Tchachos*, a Coptic manuscript dating from the early fourth century CE that was recovered in the 1970s. The gospel itself was translated and officially published by the National Geographic Society in 2006 (Meyer, "The Gospel of Judas," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 755).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 759.

<sup>76</sup> Scopello and Meyer, eds., "The Gospel of Philip 67:30-68:17," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 174; Mt. 6:6 (NRSV).

<sup>77</sup> Meyer, ed., "The Gospel of Judas 43:11-44:14," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 763; Mt. 13:1-23; Mk. 4:1-20; Lk. 8:4-15 (NRSV).

subsequent examples taken from Nag Hammadi and elsewhere makes it clear that there were just as many areas of differentiation between the religious beliefs of the “orthodox” Christians and their “heretical” counterparts as there were areas of apparent congruence. As was the case with the parallels found between the *Gospel of Thomas* and its synoptic counterparts, many instances of theological or literary differentiation are blatantly apparent to the readers as early as the opening paragraphs of several of the Nag Hammadi texts, with some of the most obvious examples being exterior rather than interior. Although much of the doctrine and cosmology found within the “heretical” recoveries from Nag Hammadi vastly contrasts the theological meat of their scriptural opposition, one of the most apparent disagreements is, interestingly enough, not the textual contents, but rather the audiences for whom they were composed.

### **III. The Gnostic Contempt Towards Those That Lack *Gnosis***

Despite the theologically exclusive attitude possessive of all modern Christian sects (and the status that Christianity has always claimed as the “One True Religion,” be it in the eyes of “orthodox” or “heretical” movements), the differences in attitude towards the expected audiences of their scriptures was entirely reliant on the fact that the prerequisites for membership were much more inclusive for the former than they were for the latter. This primarily had to do with the differing interpretations of Jesus’ final instructions towards the Apostles prior to his departure from the physical realm. Unlike the examples taken from the canonical gospels, wherein Jesus commands his disciples to, “make disciples of all nations,”<sup>78</sup> go into “all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation,”<sup>79</sup> see that, “forgiveness of sins is proclaimed

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<sup>78</sup> Mt. 28:19 (NRSV).

<sup>79</sup> Mk. 16:15 (NRSV).

in [Jesus'] name to all nations,"<sup>80</sup> to "feed my lambs,"<sup>81</sup> and to "tend my sheep,"<sup>82</sup> the Messiah shown within the surviving "New Testament Apocrypha" is nowhere near as inclusive towards those destined to become his celestial livestock, to the point of being discriminatory and picky when it comes time for the actual selection.

In contrast to the comparative inclusivity present within the canonical gospels, the introductions of several texts found amongst the Nag Hammadi codices make it apparent that many of them were written with a much narrower audience in mind. Rather than being studied, shared, and discussed amongst the general public, these works were composed and transcribed with the intent that they be reserved for the ponderings of an elite few. This attitude is primarily present in examples such as the aforementioned *Gospel of Thomas*, the (unrelated) *Book of Thomas* (c. late second century CE)<sup>83</sup>, the *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of James* (c. late second-early third century CE)<sup>84</sup> the *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of John* (c. 150 CE)<sup>85</sup>, and the *Dialogue of the Savior* (c. 250-275 CE)<sup>86</sup>, all of which are introduced to their readers as being either "hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded,"<sup>87</sup> sayings that were recited orally, "which I, Mathias, in turn, recorded,"<sup>88</sup> a "secret book revealed to [James] and Peter by the master,"<sup>89</sup> teachings that were, "hidden in silence," that he, "taught his apostle John,"<sup>90</sup> or teachings which are only permissible to those, "who have a place to store them in

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<sup>80</sup> Lk. 24:47 (NRSV).

<sup>81</sup> Jn. 21:15 (NRSV).

<sup>82</sup> Jn. 21:16 (NRSV).

<sup>83</sup> John D. Turner and Meyer, "The Book of Thomas" in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 236.

<sup>84</sup> Scopello and Meyer, "The Secret Book of James," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 21.

<sup>85</sup> Turner and Meyer, "The Secret Book of John," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 104.

<sup>86</sup> Scopello and Meyer, "The Dialogue of the Savior," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 299.

<sup>87</sup> Meyer ed., "The Gospel of Thomas Prologue," 139.

<sup>88</sup> Turner and Meyer eds., "The Book of Thomas 138:4-21," 239.

<sup>89</sup> Turner and Meyer eds., "The Secret Book of John 1:1-4," 107.

<sup>90</sup> Scopello and Meyer eds., "The Secret Book of James 1:8-2:7," 23.

their heart.”<sup>91</sup> Rather than show any strong desire to publically evangelize to the masses, the Jesus shown in these “heretical” texts makes it painstakingly clear that his true message is not intended for (or, alternatively, cannot be comprehended by) the entirety of the human race.

This degree of religious and spiritual exclusivity on the part of Jesus is apparent throughout many of these “heretical” scriptures. In addition to the above citations, one of the most blatant examples presents itself within the *Secret Book of James*. The aforementioned apostle insists that his addresses “do your best to be careful not to communicate to many people this book,” explaining that the Savior specifically, “did not want to communicate [the book] even to all of us, his twelve disciples.”<sup>92</sup> In the accompanying commentary, Marvin Meyer provides an explanation for why these verses implore such considerable secrecy in regards to their content. He specifically puts forth the argument that the Gnostic Jesus’ exclusion of the majority of the Twelve Apostles (save for St. James the Lesser and Simon-Peter) from the knowledge within this text helps support the hypothesis that Gnostic texts and authors frequently saw fit to portray conflicts between themselves and their proto-orthodox rivals through metaphorical examples and stories about Jesus and his disciples, rather than through contemporary accountings and recollections.<sup>93</sup>

Going off presumptions such as these, it is subsequently possible to look at the events that occur within the Nag Hammadi codices as metaphorically representing the theological struggles that the contemporary authors would have been undertaking against their rival representatives within the developing Christian orthodoxy. As presented by Meyer, one of the most notable examples of such a portrayal within the *Secret Book of James* is the fact that, when the chosen disciples come to receive the “secret knowledge,” “James is receptive to the words of

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<sup>91</sup> Scopello and Meyer eds., “The Dialogue of the Savior 124:23-126:5,” 303.

<sup>92</sup> Scopello and Meyer eds., “The Secret Book of James 1:8-2:7,” 23.

<sup>93</sup> Scopello and Meyer, “The Secret Book of James,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 20.

the Savior, but Peter shows no understanding,”<sup>94</sup> with the former even being described as, “the one for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.”<sup>95</sup> This is reminiscent of incidences in the *Gospel of Mary*<sup>96</sup> (c. late second century CE)<sup>97</sup>, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*, where Mary Magdalene is portrayed as, “the companion of the [Savior],”<sup>98</sup> who is explicitly invited to, “tell us the words of the Savior that you remember,”<sup>99</sup> and is actually preferred over St. Peter,<sup>100</sup> with the Gnostic Jesus mentioned as, “having loved her more than [all] the disciples,”<sup>101</sup> to the point that he proclaims he, “shall guide her to make her male,” so that she, “may become a living spirit resembling you males” since “every female who makes herself male will enter heaven’s kingdom,”<sup>102</sup> therefore making her presence more acceptable than it would have otherwise been.

While the identities of the favored Apostles are not consistent between the various Nag Hammadi manuscripts, what remains unchanged is the fact that all of these examples show St. Peter as being in some considerable degree of contention against disciples that have a more favorable connection with the Savior, as well as explicitly lacking such a connection himself. When viewed metaphorically rather than literally, the reason for this virulent apostolic envy becomes plain as day. Simon-Peter is held within Catholic doctrine to be “the rock” upon which

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>95</sup> Meyer, ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 12:2,” 141.

<sup>96</sup> As is the case with the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Mary* was not discovered amongst the Nag Hammadi codices. The most complete Coptic manuscript can be found within the Berlin Gnostic Codex, a fifth century manuscript that had been recovered in 1896 (Meyer and Pagels, “Introduction” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 2), with additional Greek fragments later identified amongst the Oxyrhynchus Papyri discovered throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Karen L. King, “The Gospel of Mary with the Greek Gospel of Mary” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 739).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 739.

<sup>98</sup> Scopello and Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Philip 63:30-64:9,” 171.

<sup>99</sup> King ed., “The Gospel of Mary 10:1-10,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 743.

<sup>100</sup> King ed., “The Gospel of Mary 15:1-17:9,” 744.

<sup>101</sup> Scopello and Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Philip 63:30-64:9,” 171.

<sup>102</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 114:2,” 153.

Jesus built his church (and the subsequent forefather of the Papacy) in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, it is natural to assume that those favored over Peter can be representative of Gnostic “heresies,” with his ignorance demonstrating the inferiority the so-called “orthodoxy” has against the *gnosis* (knowledge) required for “true” Christian belief. Such a parallel reaffirms the Gnostic viewpoint that certain elect Christians (i.e. certain elect Gnostics) were the only ones capable of obtaining (and deserving of) genuine salvation.<sup>104</sup> This consequently means that aforementioned elects would be the only ones worth providing any “secret knowledge” to in the first place. Such confidentiality possesses a duality of purpose; it is simultaneously applicable towards Jesus’ twelve disciples, and towards the broader audience to whom they will deliver the gospel.

In both cases, the point of emphasis is the fact that the words and teachings of Christ as discussed within these heretical texts should only be directed towards those select few, be they general converts, or towards his own apostles. As was the case with the contrasts made in the *Secret Book of James* between the work’s namesake and St. Peter, something similar occurs within the *Revelation (Apocalypse) of Peter* (c. late second-early third century CE)<sup>105</sup>: Jesus commands his disciple to, “listen to the things I am telling you in secret and keep them,” emphasizing that, should he share them too soon, the masses will undoubtedly, “denounce you during these ages, since they are ignorant of you,” and only, “praise you when there is knowledge.”<sup>106</sup> Such a need for confidentiality is due to the fact that, “there will be no grace among those who are not immortal;” the quota for salvation is instead exclusive to, “those chosen because of their immortal nature, which has shown it can receive the one who gives in

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<sup>103</sup> Mt. 16:18 (NRSV).

<sup>104</sup> Scopello and Meyer, “The Secret Book of James,” 19.

<sup>105</sup> Meyer, “The Revelation of Peter,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 490.

<sup>106</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 72:4-73:23,” 492.

abundance.”<sup>107</sup> This attitude of exclusivity serves as a portrayal of both the Gnostic stance of spiritual superiority over the other early Christian sects, as well as the theological schisms that were occurring between these “heretics” and their “orthodox” rivals.

#### **IV. The “Heresies” of “Proto-Orthodox” Churches and Clerics**

Apart from serving as metaphorical portrayals of the contemporary happenings of the time (i.e. the ignorance of St. Peter representing the lack of *gnosis* possessed by the “orthodox” Christian movement; Jesus’ favoritism of certain disciples representing perceived Gnostic superiority, etc.), an analysis of the secondary scholarship surrounding “heretical” Gnostic texts makes it clear that these areas of differentiation represent much more than a few blithe insinuations of spiritual superiority; they mark the very initiation of the Gnostic rejection of what would become “standard” Christian theology. As discussed by historians of religion such as Elaine Pagels, certain areas of contention between “heretical” Gnostic texts and their “canonical” counterparts might not have, to the Gnostics, been as problematic as their “proto-orthodox” critics would have claimed. This is due to the fact that, unlike their brethren, the “Gnostics tended to regard all doctrines, speculations, and myths – their own as well as others’ – only as approaches to truth,”<sup>108</sup> rather than being absolutely literal in their interpretation, style, and content. Therefore, while the presence of anachronistic quotes from texts such as the Pauline Epistles within the gnostic gospels could be seen as blatant proof of their error by an “orthodox” bishop, priest, or deacon, the “heretics” themselves would have had absolutely no problem with following them. Rather than seeing themselves as being at fault, they would have instead held

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<sup>107</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 73:23-75:7,” 492-493.

<sup>108</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 114.



the aforementioned critics as the ones who were actually guilty of error, not to mention the source of the real problem at hand.

While the theological discrepancies between Gnostic heresies and that which would become mainstream Christian dogma are numerous, and of incredible complexity, it is the dismissal of organized leadership on the part of the Gnostic movements that stands out the most. Although primary and secondary sources both make it apparent that the Gnostics had no qualm with utilizing and referring to the “canonical” gospels, treatises, and epistles (to the point that the *Gospel of Thomas*’ author may have even utilized the hypothetical “Q Gospel” as a source),<sup>109</sup> the Gnostic attitude towards religious exclusivity and favoritism does not mean that they found the presence of clerical authorities tolerable in any way, shape or form. “Orthodox” church authorities such as St. Ignatius of Antioch (35-108 CE) define the very foundation of the church as stemming from the authority of the bishop<sup>110</sup> and make it explicitly clear that, “all of you should follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father,” render unto him “all due respect according to the power of God,”<sup>111</sup> and “let the congregation be wherever the bishop is.”<sup>112</sup> With that in mind, the presented Gnostic attitude is nothing short of a complete condemnation of the existence of any sort of hierarchical priesthood, especially for purposes such as “correct” scriptural understandings or universal doctrinal conformities.

Rather than be some sort of unique opinion possessed by one or two movements whose beliefs might fall under the broad umbrella definition of “gnostic,” this attitude of disdain towards the concept of hierarchical church clergy is apparent throughout many of the sources

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<sup>109</sup> Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas,” 137; Ehrman, “The Gospel of Thomas,” in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>110</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 105.

<sup>111</sup> Ignatius, “The Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians 3:1,” in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, edited by Ehrman, 331.

<sup>112</sup> Ignatius, “The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 8:1-2,” in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, edited by Ehrman, 344.

gathered from the Nag Hammadi library and elsewhere. Apart from the examples that portray St. Peter as being spiritually inferior in comparison to his fellow disciples (and lacking of essential spiritual knowledge in the eyes of Christ), some of the most notable attacks towards any type of clerical authority are those that portray the “proto-orthodox” bishops and priests as not only lacking in genuine *gnosis*, but unknowingly using this inherent celestial ignorance as a means of keeping the masses unaware of the true methods for achieving salvation. As discussed by Pagels, Gnostic texts such as the *Second Discourse of Great Seth* (c. late second century CE)<sup>113</sup> and the *Testimony of Truth* (c. late second-early third century CE)<sup>114</sup> see fit to harshly attack those who, “claim to be enriched with the name of Christ,”<sup>115</sup> and, “make the confession, ‘We are Christians.’”<sup>116</sup> The reasoning behind these virulent attacks stems from the fact that not only are such people committing grave theological errors; they are also, “vain and ignorant,”<sup>117</sup> and, “like irrational animals,”<sup>118</sup> do not realize, “who Christ really is,”<sup>119</sup> or who they themselves truly are.

Intense intellectual attacks such as these possess a basis that is much more than some sporadic criticism of perceived spiritual laziness or unintentional ignorance on the part of the proto-orthodox opponents of Gnosticism. Rather than being a mere case of stubborn unwillingness to subscribe to true theology, this is nothing short of the “orthodox” opposition partaking in what is essentially a proxy war on behalf of the most malevolent figure within Gnostic cosmology. However, their participation is not as apparent (or as consensual) as such a harsh claim initially suggests. The examples cited by Pagels are in agreement that those representing the pinnacle of the Gnostics’ proto-orthodox rivals are, in actuality, guilty of

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<sup>113</sup> Meyer, “The Second Discourse of Great Seth,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 476.

<sup>114</sup> Birger A. Pearson ed., “The Testimony of Truth,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 616.

<sup>115</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 102; Meyer ed., “The Second Discourse of Great Seth 60:13-62:1,” 482.

<sup>116</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 103; Pearson ed., “The Testimony of Truth 31:22-34:26,” 618.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, 618.

<sup>118</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 102; Meyer ed., “The Second Discourse of Great Seth 59:19-60:12,” 482.

<sup>119</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 103; Pearson ed., “The Testimony of Truth 31:22-34:26,” 618.

subscribing to all manner of falsehoods and superstitions. Rather than understanding the true identity and nature of Christ, they are doing nothing more than, “hastening towards the principles and the authorities,” and falling, “into their clutches because of the ignorance that is in them.”<sup>120</sup> It is, ironically, because of the rigorous and strict organization of these aforementioned “principles and authorities,” that the entirety of proto-orthodox Christianity drowning in such ignorance to begin with.

According to these “heretical” views, the “orthodox” teachings regarding Christian belief are nothing short of moronic subscriptions to horridly erroneous myths. As discussed within the *Second Discourse of Great Seth*, any physical incarnation that the Gnostic Jesus appears to possess in front of his audiences should not be viewed as actual material substance, by any definition. In the same sense, when discussing events such as his earthly ministry and crucifixion, it must be made clear that Jesus, “did not die in actuality but only in appearance,” and, “suffered only in their eyes in their thought”<sup>121</sup> rather than in any real sense. Instead of willingly dying for the purpose of absolving the sins of humanity, this version of Jesus explains that, “the death they think I suffered they suffered in their error and blindness,”<sup>122</sup> implying that those who genuinely believe the physical death of a material body to have any necessity for Jesus’ mission and the saving of humankind are nothing short of small-minded idiots, completely lacking in the “spiritual immortality” that is compulsory for true salvation. It is such an emphasis on the explicitly erroneous belief towards the death of Christ, and the impossibility of such an occurrence, that made these supposed errors so profound in the minds of Gnostic theologians.

This intense rejection of the physical death of any material body of Christ’s has to do with the overall sense of animosity present within Gnostic belief towards all aspects of physical

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 618.

<sup>121</sup> Meyer ed., “The Second Discourse of Great Seth 55:9-56:20,” 480.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 480.

and material creation. When discussing the crucifixion, the Jesus within the Nag Hammadi codices suggests that, while the execution itself occurred, he was in no way physically present, and actually found the incident absurd (and absolutely hilarious) to witness, if only for the idiocy on the part of his supposed tormenters. This is not to say that the Gnostic Jesus found sociopathic humor in the fact that Simon of Cyrene (mentioned as having helped him carried his cross in the canonical gospels)<sup>123</sup> was unintentionally crucified in his place, but rather, the fact that, even when someone else, “bore the cross on his shoulder,” and “wore the crown of thorns,” Jesus was, “on high, poking fun at all the excesses of the rulers and the fruit of their error and conceit.”<sup>124</sup> Such a stance is further reaffirmed in the *Revelation of Peter*, where it is made clear that, “the one you see [laughing above the cross] is the living Jesus,” while, “the one into whose hands and feet they are driving nails is his fleshy part, the substitute for him.”<sup>125</sup> Regardless of any apparent discrepancies, the intent within these passages is quite clear: despite the historical authenticity and absolute reality that a crucifixion did occur at Golgotha that day, the “living Jesus” (i.e. the only one worth any spiritual attention) was not affected in any way, shape, or form.

The reason for the insignificant nature of Christ’s execution, and its apparent impossibility, owes to the aforementioned Gnostic disdain for the entirety of material creation. Gnostic theology taught its followers that, rather than confirm the existence and miracles of some sort of monotheistic Omnigod, the Old and New Testaments had actually chronicled the actions of two vastly contrasting deities that represented a very small percentage within a much broader cosmology. As discussed within the *Secret Book of John* and *On the Origin of the World* (c. late third-early fourth century CE)<sup>126</sup> the “God” of the Old Testament (i.e. the creator of the

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<sup>123</sup> Mt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26 (NRSV).

<sup>124</sup> Meyer ed., “The Second Discourse of Great Seth 55:9-56:20,” 480.

<sup>125</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 81:3-82:3,” 496.

<sup>126</sup> Meyer ed., “On the Origin of the World,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 202.

physical world) is, in actuality, anything but. Rather than possess anything resembling genuine divinity, omnipotence, or omniscience, “Yaldabaoth” as he is called is nothing more than a lesser agent of the “God of truth” and a renegade child of “Pistis Sophia” that has, “great authority in himself,” but is, “ignorant of where he came from,”<sup>127</sup> and “wicked in the mindlessness within him.”<sup>128</sup> While Yaldabaoth (or alternatively, the “Demiurge”) is still the creator of the heavens and the earth, this ignorance towards his origins has caused him to repeatedly declare that, “I am God and there is no other god beside me,”<sup>129</sup> despite the fact that, by making such a specific proclamation, he only succeeded in suggesting “to the angels with him that there is another god.”<sup>130</sup> Any genuine monotheistic deity would have had no reason for doing so owing to its obvious omnipresence and omniscience.

The incredibly rash (and inaccurate) nature of such a statement resulted in a vast plethora of negative consequences. Specifically, by making such a bold claim, “Yaldabaoth” was not only guilty of sinning, “against all the other immortals who spoke forth;”<sup>131</sup> he was guilty of having blinded all of creation, “so that none might know the God that is over them all,”<sup>132</sup> and instead rely on one that, “does not have foreknowledge.”<sup>133</sup> As was the case with certain attributes of the Gnostic Jesus, this lack of foreknowledge is evidenced by instances taken from the canonical Old Testament, specifically the fact that in the Book of Genesis, “God” has to explicitly ask for Adam and Eve’s location after their eating of the Forbidden Fruit, while a truly omniscient deity would have been more than aware of their whereabouts (and of what had transpired).<sup>134</sup> Due to this blindness, the only one who is capable of genuinely knowing “the God of truth” is, “the

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<sup>127</sup> Meyer ed., “On the Origin of the World 99:23-100:20” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 204.

<sup>128</sup> Turner and Meyer eds., “The Secret Book of John 10:19-13:13,” 115-117.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 116; Isaiah 45:5-6; Isa. 46:9 (NRSV).

<sup>130</sup> Turner and Meyer eds., “The Secret Book of John 10:19-13:13,” 115-117.

<sup>131</sup> Meyer ed., “On the Origin of the World 103:2-32,” 206.

<sup>132</sup> Meyer ed., “The Secret Book of John 25:16-30:11,” 130.

<sup>133</sup> Pearson ed., “The Testimony of Truth 45:23-49:10,” 623.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 623; Gen. 3:9 (NRSV).

person who forsakes all things of this world and renounces the whole place,”<sup>135</sup> such rejections being absolutely obligatory for, “the spirit in the flesh,”<sup>136</sup> to rise, rather than the flesh itself.

In contrast of this abhorrence of the physical creation initiated by the fraudulent “God” of the Old Testament, the God discussed by the Gnostic Jesus is held to be authentic in his supremacy. The Gnostic worldview holds that, being an agent of “the God of truth,” the notion that any aspect of the Savior was truly physical would be, at best, completely ludicrous, and, at worst, horridly sacrilegious. While portrayals vary between the comparatively human Jesus quoted within the *Gospel of Thomas*, the “living Jesus,” who is shown “smiling and laughing above the cross,” in the *Revelation of Peter*,<sup>137</sup> or the Jesus mentioned in the *Acts of John*<sup>138</sup> (c. late second century CE)<sup>139</sup> as not being human in any way, but a being whose substance was, “immaterial and bodiless and as if it were not existing at all,”<sup>140</sup> they are in agreement that the Gnostic image of the Savior was not of the same nature as his “orthodox” equivalent. Owing to the malevolent nature of the physical world, the genuine Savior would have to be fully spiritual in his essence, and therefore have had no need for any sort of physical mortal body. This would have allowed him to successfully avoid the bondage imposed by Yaldabaoth and act as an agent of the “God of truth.” As a result, those who have falsely assumed Jesus to have had some sort of physical existence and undergone a physical death are nothing more than collaborators who are helping furthering the bondage put in place by the Demiurge rather than lessening it.

It is precisely because of this ignorance and perceived collaboration that the Gnostics so greatly abhor the concept of clerical leadership occurring within their churches. Through their

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<sup>135</sup> Pearson, ed., “The Testimony of Truth 41:4-21,” 620.

<sup>136</sup> Scopello and Meyer eds., “The Gospel of Philip 56:26-57:22,” 165.

<sup>137</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 81:3-82:3,” 496.

<sup>138</sup> As was the case with the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary*, this text was not discovered amongst the Nag Hammadi codices. It was instead found independently in various manuscripts that were collectively published as a singular text in 1898 (Elliott, “The Acts of John,” in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 303).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>140</sup> Ehrman ed., “The Acts of John 93,” in *Lost Scriptures*, 104; Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 73.

theological mindset, not only was the existence of bishops, priests, and other absolute clerical authorities sacrilegious, owing to their collaborations with the Demiurge, such occurrences were eerily repetitive in their nature, especially when contrasted against the historical record. As was the case in the days of Jesus himself, wherein “the Pharisees and the scholars,” had, “taken the keys of knowledge and have hidden them,” and forbidden entry to all, even themselves,<sup>141</sup> deacons, priests and bishops representing the proto-orthodox movement have committed a very similar sin, said sin being the celestial blinding of those who would otherwise be eligible for salvation via erroneous and complex doctrines, as well as the assistance of the being who is responsible for humanity’s imprisonment in the material realm.

Regardless of whether or not their collaboration with Yaldabaoth is consensual or unwilling, those that claim to represent divine authority on earth should be universally viewed as nothing of the sort. As discussed within the *Revelation of Peter*, there are those, “outside our number who call themselves bishops and deacons, as if they have received authority from God,”<sup>142</sup> but are in fact, anything but. Rather than express the best interests of the Christian community and teach the correct means for obtaining salvation, the intentions of “orthodox” clerics, no matter how noble, can only result in spiritual harm to those underneath them:

They will hold onto the name of a dead man, thinking that in this way they will become pure, but instead they will become more and more defiled. They will fall into a name of error and into the hand of an evil deceiver with complicated doctrines, and they will be dominated by heresy.<sup>143</sup>

Out of everything presented in this passage, it is this labeling of those whose beliefs will become standard Christian theology as “heretics” in their own right (by those who have been so frequently given the title) that stands out the most. In the eyes of Gnostic communities, not only

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<sup>141</sup> Meyer ed., “The Gospel of Thomas 39:1-2,” 144.

<sup>142</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 78:31-79:31,” 495.

<sup>143</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 73:23-75:7,” 493.

are those who have accused them of wrongdoing themselves guilty of falling into the trap put forth by the Demiurge, they are nothing more than “dry canals,” that “bow before the judgment of their leaders,”<sup>144</sup> and insist on their superiority even after being denounced by that whom they consider to be the direct successor of Christ.

This direct use of the label of “heretic” within these Gnostic writings demonstrates that, rather than serving as the manner in which one movement simply derides its opponent and calls into question their authenticity, the labeling of opposing movements as “heretics” serves as a manner of genuine demonization for both sides. As discussed within texts such as *Authoritative Discourse* (c. late second-early third century CE)<sup>145</sup>, the, “adversaries that contend with us,”<sup>146</sup> (i.e. the “orthodoxy”) are all lacking in genuine *gnosis* and entirely obsessed with physical fulfillments, to the point that those, “who are ignorant do not seek God,” and instead “live like animals.”<sup>147</sup> This reaches the point where both sides ironically come to the agreement that those who adhere to such “heretical” beliefs are even, “more wicked than pagans,”<sup>148</sup> owing to the fact that, rather than give into the worship of idols or polytheistic superstitions, they allow their “hardness of heart,” to take control of them and binding them to nothing more than blindness and ignorance, while the latter are at least moral enough to give to charity and perform acts of generosity towards those around them.<sup>149</sup>

In lieu of this revelation that the pejorative label of “heretic” was just as liberally applied to “proto-orthodox” Christians as it was to the Gnostic “heretics,” the responses that early church fathers had to the spread of these “heresies” prior to the installation of the Nicene Creed would

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<sup>144</sup> Meyer ed., “The Revelation of Peter 78:31-79:31,” 495.

<sup>145</sup> Scopello and Meyer, “Authoritative Discourse,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 382.

<sup>146</sup> Scopello and Meyer eds., “Authoritative Discourse 25:27-27,” 385.

<sup>147</sup> Scopello and Meyer eds., “Authoritative Discourse 33:4-34:32,” 388.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 388.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 388.



have been required to extend beyond mere cases of theological argument. While many of the earliest condemnations of Gnostic “heretics” had occurred prior to the Council of Nicaea, surviving texts from the era as well as the surrounding scholarly commentaries suggest that the rationale for such detailed attacks was rather singular in its design. Not only were such attacks towards the “heretical” intended to strengthen the base of the developing proto-orthodoxy, they were seen as a necessary means of weakening any and all theological rhetoric put forth by the opposition. This in turn made their subsequent condemnation and elimination all the easier in the years after the legalization of the faith and the promotion of a state enforced Nicene-based interpretation of Christianity at the hands of Theodosius I.

#### **V. The Canonical Disproval, Demotion, and Suppression of the Heretical**

Despite the universal goal possessed by those early church fathers who saw fit to attack and condemn those guilty of heresy, their motives and reasons for such attitudes are just as varied as the movements that they were engaged in debunking. Amongst many such reasons, one of the most apparent bases with which to attack those who were unrepentantly guilty of “heresy” stemmed from the apparent contempt they had for the trappings of physical creation. The critiques of early martyrs such as St. Ignatius of Antioch could be seen as stemming from something of a fear that beliefs, “that [Christ] only appeared to suffer,”<sup>150</sup> could invalidate their own martyrdoms. The rationale of said martyrdoms stemmed from the belief that, by dying for the sake of their faith, they were imitating the suffering underwent by Christ, thereby transforming themselves into “a sacrificial offering bound to the cross,”<sup>151</sup> while simultaneously

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<sup>150</sup> Ignatius, “The Letter of Ignatius to the Trallians 10:1,” in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, edited by Ehrman, 334; Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 152.

<sup>151</sup> Ignatius, “The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians 18:1,” in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, edited by Ehrman, 328.

demonstrating to their fellows that the pains of the material world were nothing when compared to the glory that was ethereal salvation. Ehrman goes on to explain the importance that such beliefs had for the foundations of “proto-orthodox” theology as a whole. By willing to die a potentially horrid death for the sake of their faith, early martyrs such as Ignatius and Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155 CE) were demonstrating the unquestionable authenticity of their religion, achieving their own salvation while simultaneously proving the falsity of heretical belief, with the heretics themselves being unwilling to undergo such self-sacrifice for the sake of their fraudulent theology.<sup>152</sup> The fact that the Gnostics often considered those who “ignorantly give themselves up to a human death”<sup>153</sup> to be nothing short of moronic and misguided only further demonstrated the apparent falsity of their belief, especially when contrasted against that which was absolutely and unquestionably factual.

Despite the manner in which the sacrifices of “proto-orthodox” martyrs were seen as a means of legitimizing canonical Christian beliefs when compared to the heretical opposition, the motivations behind and means of disproving the heretics were by no means universal. In the case of church fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyons, it would not have been enough to simply denounce the Gnostic claims of superiority as the lies of heretics solely on the basis of occasional theological divergence, or through demonstrating the legitimacy and authenticity of the developing “proto-orthodoxy.” Therefore, the only successful approach would have instead been one that provided hard evidence that supported the unquestionable authenticity of proto-orthodox Christian beliefs, while concurrently demonstrating the logical errors present within any and all forms of heretical opposition. Within his work *Against Heresies* (published c. 180 CE), Irenaeus stresses the superiority of “proto-orthodox” Christian theology, while simultaneously disproving

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<sup>152</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 139.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 138; Pearson ed., “The Testimony of Truth 31:22-34:26,” 618.

the falsehoods of Gnostic heresies, not through petty quarreling or the exchanging the casual *ad hominem*, but by demonstrating the flaws in the arguments that the Gnostics themselves had often presented as absolute theological fact.

Through intense criticisms such as these, Irenaeus was able to put forth a much sturdier argument than what would have otherwise resulted. In regards to the theological deviations that the numerous branches of Gnosticism had made when compared to its proto-orthodox contemporaries, the Bishop of Lyons argued that this was the result of both envy and ignorance on the part of such heretics. This is to say that the finer theological elements of Gnostic belief, such as the dualistic conflict between the Demiurge/Yaldabaoth and the “God of truth,” or the solely ethereal nature of Jesus, did not come about as a result of genuinely valid theology. Rather, these deviations within the Gnostic heresies stemmed from a desire of the heretics to artificially put themselves above their canonical fellows and, by extension, above the entirety of physical creation. Despite the apparent superiority this would suggest of those whose beliefs fall under the umbrella definition of “Gnostic,” all that they have really done is, “truly reveal their infidelity,” since they have, “fallen away into the belief of that which has no existence,”<sup>154</sup> thereby demonstrating the impossibility of the theology they had so pitifully attempted to defend as being genuine. The effect that these detailed critiques of Gnostic belief had on reinforcing the legitimacy of the “proto-orthodox” creed (as well as the artificiality of the “heresies”) was resoundingly successful in almost every aspect.

Far from being a solitary strategy pursued by a singular theologian, this tactic of “proto-orthodox” church authorities criticizing and debunking “heretical” doctrines (rather than merely insisting on the superiority of their own) was both widespread as well as incredibly organized and consistent with one another. In imitation of the example presented by Irenaeus, later church

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<sup>154</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.2.

fathers such as Eusebius were quick to follow his documentation and condemnation of heresies with similar methods of their own. Eusebius in particular was quick to support Irenaeus' earlier writings with the observation that figures such as "Simon Magus," (mentioned in The Acts of the Apostles as having attempted to bribe Saints Peter and John into sharing the healing power of the Holy Spirit)<sup>155</sup> often convinced their fellows that they were in possession of supernatural powers and had been granted divine authority. These claims stemmed not from genuine religious devotion or sincerity, but from petty jealousy of the genuine grace that had been visited upon the disciples and the developing Jesus movement. This jealousy, combined with the stubbornness of Simon Magus and others towards their own lack of divine blessing, lead to them evolving from fraudulent representatives of the church into the first true heretics.<sup>156</sup> As a result, apart from ignoring clear canonical existence of theological points such as the oneness of God,<sup>157</sup> all that later "heretics" such as the Gnostics were accomplishing was common subscription to a worldview that was laughably illogical, theologically impossible, and factually erroneous, whether it related to this point, or to virtually any heretical argument that they attempted to profess as legitimate against the genuine traditions of their "proto-orthodox" opposition.

After demonstrating this false commitment held by the heretics towards their own beliefs, as well as the immense contradictions their religious views possessed when compared to those of their genuine kin, the objectives of these early church fathers shifted towards ensuring the elimination of any and all resources that could potentially lead to resurgences in such horridly erroneous thought. Just as how the simplest means of analyzing the finer points of Gnostic beliefs stemmed from the study of extant texts that had been condemned as heretical, the development, canonization, and enforcement of a singular "proto-orthodox" theology partially

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<sup>155</sup> Acts 8:9-24 (NRSV).

<sup>156</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.23; Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 164-165.

<sup>157</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.11.1.

relied on an intense screening process towards potential candidates for inclusion into what would eventually become Christian scripture. While the absolute composition of the New Testament was officially listed for the first time in St. Athanasius of Alexandria's (296-373 CE) 39<sup>th</sup> Easter Letter in 367 CE, it was merely officiating that which earlier church fathers had been decreeing for centuries: the sacred texts that were read by the "proto-orthodox" Christian churches were the only legitimate and divinely inspired scriptures; any and all others were nothing more than sacrilegious forgeries, penned by malevolent heretics who were seeking to confuse and divide the true believers, preventing them from recognizing the difference between genuine and fraudulent belief.<sup>158</sup>

While the canon proposed and penned down by St. Athanasius is practically identical to the earlier lists that had been put together by Eusebius and other church fathers, its importance stems from the absolute nature it possessed when compared to all of its predecessors. While the proto-orthodox Christians had long been in mutual agreement as to which books were authentic (i.e. the Synoptic Gospels and John, the Pauline Epistles, etc.) when compared to competitors that had sprung up over the years, there had always been some debate towards one or two unique examples. This attitude is most notably presented by Eusebius when discussing books wherein there has not been a final confirmation of their canonicity:

Those that are disputed, yet familiar to most, include the epistles known as James, Jude, and 2 Peter, and those called 2 and 3 John, the work of either the evangelist or of someone else with the same name.<sup>159</sup>

While all of the listed texts would eventually receive inclusion in the codified New Testament, the context of this passage refers to such a time when books that are presently considered authentic were still in the midst of being reviewed and had not yet been accepted by the entirety

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<sup>158</sup> Ehrman ed., "The Canon of Athanasius of Alexandria," in *Lost Scriptures*, 339-340.

<sup>159</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, translated by Williamson, edited by Louth, 3.25.3.

of the “proto-orthodox” movement. Although the canon declared by St. Athanasius was by no means the final decision in regards to proto-orthodox positions on the New Testament, it was one of the most absolute when it came to establishing finite strategies for discriminating between, “the books of the New Testament,” the non-canonical books that are “not, on the one hand, included in the canon,” but can be read by recent converts to the faith, and, the “apocryphal books created by heretics,” who, “try to bestow favor on them by assigning them dates that by setting them forth as ancients,” can successfully deceive those stupid enough to believe in their counterfeit authenticity.<sup>160</sup>

Far from being the mere composition of lists or the picking and choosing of certain personal favorites over others, this promotion of the earlier canonical texts over the later non-canonical ones served as a means of strengthening an organized theological foundation that had already been established through the provision of evidence ascertaining the illogical contradictions within the various “heresies.” Such necessity presented itself well before the development of any official church canon. Earlier theologians such as Irenaeus had already taken time to go into great detail regarding the exact canonicity of the New Testament, making it quite clear that the scriptures utilized by the proto-orthodox movement were the only ones that possessed any genuine validity. When discussing the texts that were often found in heretical Gnostic circulation (including many that would later be recovered from Nag Hammadi), Irenaeus found it vitally important to emphasize the manner in which they differed from their canonical counterparts. Most notably, Irenaeus explained to his readers that, “since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principle winds,” it is subsequently, “not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer,”<sup>161</sup> than four in their own right. Furthermore, all of the

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<sup>160</sup> Athanasius, “The Canon of Athanasius of Alexandria,” in *Lost Scriptures*, edited by Ehrman, 340.

<sup>161</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8.

Gnostic texts, treatises, epistles, and gospels that he is aware of, “agree in nothing with the Gospels of the Apostles,” whereas any and all authentic Gospels and other factual Christian texts should, by default, be, “well arranged and harmonized”<sup>162</sup> with one another. This meant that, rather than being genuine first hand accounts that had been penned by Jesus’ early followers and disciples, these contradictory books that emphasized a multitude of different points and opinions and almost always disagreed with the established canon were nothing more than “heretical” forgeries that did nothing more than promote blasphemous attitudes and confuse those who would otherwise be genuinely devout Christians.

The effect that this direct condemnation of heretical texts had on the development of the “proto-orthodox” doctrine was monumental. In imitation of the example put forth by Irenaeus, later church fathers such as Eusebius would support his notions towards exposing the historical and theological forgeries within Gnostic scriptures. Such church fathers saw fit to emphasize the fact that, “the ideas and implications of their contents are so irreconcilable with true orthodoxy,” that genuine Christians need look no further in order to recognize such works as being inherently inauthentic in their design.<sup>163</sup> Documents such as Eusebius’ *History of the Church* (with the earliest edition published c. 311 CE, and later editions released around the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE)<sup>164</sup> discouraged these heretical practices by detailing the finer points of Gnostic scripture, as well as chronicling the perceived histories of any and all heretical movements themselves, such as the aforementioned case of “Simon Magus.” Strategies such as this not only assisted the true Christians in discriminating between canonical authenticity and heretical forgery; it presented a prototypical doctrinal framework that, with the legalization of faith in 313 CE and the formation of the Nicene Creed little more than a decade later, would

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 3.11.9.

<sup>163</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, translated by Williamson, edited by Louth, 3.25.7.

<sup>164</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 337

transform the established stances of “proto-orthodox” Christianity, triggering their evolution from being mere religious opinion into absolute theological law.

This system of analyzing and debunking the historical and theological validity of Gnostic beliefs and scriptures had a monumental effect on the status and perceived accuracy of such “heretical” beliefs as a whole. While those who were among the “heretical” Gnostics had initially found some appeal of their apparent possession of “secret knowledge” and the thought of possessing lost secrets that had been passed on by Christ to only his most worthy followers, this sense of theological superiority was not meant to last. Apart from the various flaws and questions that had arisen after a fine-tuned analysis of Gnostic theology had been performed, the aforementioned critiques performed by the early church fathers had significantly contributed to the establishment of canonical church laws and doctrines, which, following the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, were both legal and in a degree of fluctuation with the laws of the state. Historian of religion Charles Freeman explains that, while this new relationship between church and state was not entirely synonymous, it still gave the church more power than ever before, to the point that it could now force the Gnostics to, “surrender their present churches to the Nicenes,” as well as prohibit the construction of replacements, legally banish them from the city limits, and eventually deny them certain rights such as religious tax exemption.<sup>165</sup> Actions such as these, combined with the eventual demotion of the Gnostics (as well as any and all other pre-Nicene “heresies”) from mere religious dissenters into factual enemies of the state, guaranteed that such “heretics” would be gradually and finitely stripped of any degree of religious equality that they had once held alongside the aforementioned “Nicenes.” These events all but guaranteed

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<sup>165</sup> Charles Freeman, *A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State*, (New York: The Overlook Press, 2009), 93.



the inevitable decline and extinction of Gnosticism in Europe,<sup>166</sup> with one of their final descendants, the Cathars, being formally condemned by the “one holy Catholic and Apostolic church” that had been doctrinally unified, scripturally consistent, and lead by an organized clerical hierarchy for centuries, leading to the latter’s assault, suppression, and dissolution of the former during the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) in the High Middle Ages.<sup>167</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Although the legalization of the Christian faith by Constantine I during the fourth century CE had helped spell the inevitable demise of movements outside the mainstream that had been deemed “heretical,” by “proto-orthodox” Christianity, it was not the sole cause of their demotion, suppression, and eventual extinction. As discussed by historians of religion such as Pagels, one of the primary guarantees of success that the now-legal proto-orthodoxy possessed over heretical rivals such as the Gnostics was, ironically, the emphases on theological conformity and organized clerical leadership that the various branches of Gnosticism had despised so greatly.<sup>168</sup> As previously mentioned, the Gnostics saw themselves as being spiritually above those that lacked a proper understanding of (or the ability to acquire) *gnosis*, considered their “spiritual truth” to be above doctrinal consistency, were incredibly divisive in their beliefs, and absolutely abhorred the concept of organized leadership, instead preferring a “spiritual” church<sup>169</sup> wherein those lucky few that had access to *gnosis* openly contemplated it and shared it alongside their fellows.<sup>170</sup> With that in mind, their orthodox rivals had developed a hierarchical and absolute

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>167</sup> Meyer, *The Gnostic Bible*, 27.

<sup>168</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 118.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 117-118; Einar Thomassen ed., “The Interpretation of Knowledge 18:28-34,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 659-660.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 659-660.

leadership, finite scriptural consistency, absolute doctrinal authority, numerous commentaries against those whose views were held to be purposely incorrect, and maintained the belief that their church was inherently “universal” in its nature, and consequently possessed the divine authority to project its theological worldview onto all of humanity. This subsequently confirmed that “one holy Catholic and Apostolic church” would remain the absolute theological authority in Western Europe for more than a millennium, up until the Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the subsequent advent of the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648).

While there was once a time when those described as “proto-orthodox” Christians and their numerous “heretical” rivals were essentially equal in regards to theological standing, the organized nature of the former ensured their eventual superiority over the latter. Consequently, it was the formation, passage, and enforcement of the Nicene Creed that had transformed the early “Jesus movement” into the basic format for all of Christianity, guaranteeing that the “proto-orthodox” movement was now, for all intents and purposes, the only legitimate Christian church. Such theological superiority subsequently granted them the authority to proclaim themselves the only “holy Catholic and Apostolic church.” This not only guaranteed that their disorganized opposition would be disallowed any chance of inclusion and inevitably stripped of any claim to authenticity; it ensued that the “heretics” continued expression of their erroneous beliefs would be uprooted and harshly punished by a church that, following the passage of the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 CE, was sanctioned by the state and in possession of absolute religious power and authority, rather than mere claims of such. This established a system of strictly ensuring doctrinal conformity that would last well beyond the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE. Not only would the Roman Catholic Church develop just as great of a theological foothold following the re-Christianization of Europe between the seventh and

fifteenth centuries, the detailed identification, description, and debunking of early heresies (such as Gnosticism) by the likes of Irenaeus and Eusebius, as well as the faith's close interactions with secular governance, provided the church with the means and resources to stamp out any and all potential resurgences, while simultaneously disarming any new heresies that might develop on their own accord in the years to come. As demonstrated by the evidence presented herein, these "proto-orthodox" critiques and reactions against the dangers presented by early "heretical" sects of Christianity such as Gnosticism not only guaranteed the faith's theological unity and continued survival, it all but ensured the concurrent establishment of what was and what was not proper Christian "orthodoxy."

**Supplanting the “Wrong” with the “Right:” The Theological Demotion of the *Zindiqs*, the *Dhimmah*, and All Others Guilty of *Bid’ah***

**I. Introduction**

When compared to its Judaic and Christian predecessors, the Islamic faith holds the claimed distinction amongst the Abrahamic religions as being both the first and the last of its kind. Rather than seeing itself as theological improvement upon that which had already been revealed to the faithful by earlier prophets, the religion that was brought forth by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE) could be most easily described by devout Muslims as a “restoration” rather than a mere addition. This is to say that Islam views itself as being both the, “True Religion in God’s eyes,”<sup>171</sup> (i.e. the first and only genuine faith practiced by the earliest forefathers of humanity), as well as its final revival, brought forth by Muhammad to those “People of the Book” who had diluted the genuine message to the point that they had been sealed, “in their disbelief, so they believe only a little.”<sup>172</sup> The nature of such a restorative view of religious belief means that Islam has had to historically explain why both its predecessors and its offshoots have so egregiously deviated from what was ideally considered the factual path when challenging and overcoming beliefs and movements that could be deemed “heretical.”

When discussing the view of “heresy” as it applies to Islam, the concept is nowhere near as straightforward as it is when compared to Christianity. Unlike early and medieval heretical groups that were historically condemned and proscribed by the developing Christian “proto-orthodoxy” (i.e. Gnosticism, Pelagianism, Arianism, etc.) because of their perceived deviations from the “canonical” mindset, the Islamic viewpoint is one of arguably greater lenience. The

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<sup>171</sup> The Qur’an, 3:19.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 4:155.

reason for this degree of tolerance stems from the fact that Islam holds itself to be the first religion revealed to humankind, with any and all monotheistic predecessors, such as “those who practice the Jewish faith, the Sabians, the Christians,” and “the Magians (Zoroastrians),”<sup>173</sup> actually being descendants, all of whom possess evidence of authenticity, as determined by the existence of written scriptures, as well as a common descent from the prophet Abraham. Despite this common theological ancestry, it has been made clear since the time of Muhammad that all of these so-called descendants have somehow deviated from the original message, with the most notable confrontations occurring in the years after the Prophet’s exile to Medina in 622 CE. While various verses taken from the Qur’an clarify that God has, “sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people,”<sup>174</sup> with there being, “a Scripture for every age,”<sup>175</sup> and a prophet sent to every nation,<sup>176</sup> numerous others are quick to chastise these “People of the Book” for replacing the genuine word of God with falsehoods and deviations of their own design. While they were not guilty of “heresy” in the strictest sense, the coming of Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets,”<sup>177</sup> in 610 CE served not as the arrival of something new, but rather, the revival of that which was already there, simultaneously seeking to reintroduce the truth to those who had lost their way and willingly subscribed to falsehoods.

Despite this nature of being both the first and last divine provision to mankind, the maintenance of Islam’s theological authenticity has required much more than this mere correction of its predecessors. While there is an unquestionable condemnation of those who, “divide their religion into sects, with each party rejoicing in their own,”<sup>178</sup> a cursory examination

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 22:17.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 3:3-4.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 13:39.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 10:47.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 33:40.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 30:32.

of the Qur'an and other such sources makes it clear that the "perfected religion" is not without its own points of theological divergence in the time following Muhammad's ministry. Although the Shia-Sunni split that occurred in the period immediately following the Prophet's passing in 632 CE could be considered one of the most apparent moments of division, an analysis of various primary and secondary source materials makes it clear that it is not the sole example. The complication with this analysis stems from the fact that Islam, unlike "proto-orthodox" post-Nicene Christianity, is not in possession of any sort of organized hierarchical clerical authority that could make such decisions regarding what is "heretical" and what is not. While there have been views detailing what would be acceptable for mainstream belief versus what might be considered too extreme, it is not nearly as precise as the comparable Christian mindset. With these points in mind, the argument presented here is that the most notable aspect regarding any perceived Islamic attitudes towards "heresy" is the manner in which it must simultaneously look both forwards and backwards when correcting erroneous beliefs, discouraging future innovations from the already perfected religion, whilst concurrently seeking explanations as to how and why its Judaic-Christian predecessors fell so far away from the genuine path to salvation.

In order to properly understand this dual nature of "heresy" as it relates to Islam, an analysis of the Islamic attitude towards its predecessors (i.e. the "People of the Book") as well as deviations between the faith's different sects (i.e. Sunni, Shia, Sufism, "Kharijite," etc.) is necessary. Initially, this task would seem incredibly complex, owing to the complete lack of any sort of supreme religious authority or universal doctrine within Islam. Consequently, a review of the exact Islamic definitions for the concept of "heresy" (or its closest equivalent) must be performed. Scholars such as Bernard Lewis are sure to comment on the complicated nature of such a task, explaining that, in addition to the lack of definite theological authority, there is no

genuine word within Islamic terminology equivalent to that of “heresy.” Indeed, the only terms of any comparison are “*harlaqa* – heresy, and *hurtuqi* (or *harliqi*) – heretic,”<sup>179</sup> both of which are Christian loan words that were only used by, “Western trained historians seeking to apply to their own history the principles and methods learnt elsewhere,”<sup>180</sup> rather than possessing any Islamic precedent. While this might go so far as to suggest that, “Islam, with its 72 and more named heresies, has no name for heresy,”<sup>181</sup> further analysis makes it clear that this is nowhere near the case once a more creative search has been performed. Rather than exclusively seeking out and addressing “heresies” in the same manner as early church fathers within Christianity, there must instead be a hunt for the closest comparable Islamic concepts, with the understanding that no singular term will be completely identical to those stemming from Islam’s sister faith.

The reward gained via the analysis of Islamic terminology of a comparable equivalence to “heresy” is substantial. Not only do such observations allow for an understanding of the generally ambiguous attitude towards the “heretical” that exists within Islam; it creates a broader academic understanding as to how such vague definitions have historically allowed for an attitude of general lenience and religious pluralism within mainstream Muslim society towards those groups whose beliefs deviate away from orthodox mindset. Such religious pluralism would have not only applied towards Islamic beliefs that existed outside of the orthodox bubble, but also to the monotheistic faiths that had been in place long before the time of Muhammad and had been granted a degree of recognition by the Prophet for their semi-authenticity. This recognition of certain religious minorities stemmed from the fact that earlier faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, (as well as others), would have all been considered the spiritual

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<sup>179</sup> Bernard Lewis, “Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in Islam,” *Studia Islamica*, No. 1 (1953): 51

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 51-52.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

ancestors of Islam, with each in possession of their own prophets and sacred scriptures guaranteeing their authenticity.

This overview of the early Islamic attitude towards the monotheistic religious minorities they encountered as well as the shared spiritual ancestry they were perceived to possess with each other will help establish a crucial point of understanding. Rather than be seen as separate religions during the days of the Prophet Muhammad, “those that follow the Jewish faith, the Sabians, the Christians,” and “the Magians,” would have possessed an equal status to their Muslim brethren amongst a much broader community of monotheistic “Believers.” Through a detailed review of various passages taken from the Qur’an, as well as secondary biographies of the Prophet, it will subsequently become possible to comprehend the initial reasons for such broad religious equality existing within the early Islamic community. This shall consequently assist with understanding the reasons behind the gradual demotion of non-Muslim Believers, wherein they devolved from citizens of equal standing to second-class religious minorities possessing the arguably derogatory label of “protected peoples” or *dhimmah*.

While discussing the course of this theological demotion of Jewish and Christian Believers to the status of *dhimmah*, the point shall be made that the justification for such demotions would have, ironically, stemmed from the shared ancestry these earlier religions possessed with that which would become Islam. Specifically, it shall be made clear that since some of the theological views of earlier Abrahamic religions contradicted the revelations of Muhammad, the only feasible conclusion available to the Prophet was that it was the views of the earlier faiths that had detracted from divine truth rather than his own. This in turn will make it easier to understand how, while they are not automatically classified as such, this demotion of Islam’s perceived spiritual ancestors from “Believers” to *dhimmah* was not some reactionary



attitude towards other beliefs or the blithe suppression of religious minorities; it was the exposure of earlier Believers who had deviated away from the genuine religion of Abraham, whose actions made them guilty of what can only be described as a “reverse heresy.”

This classification of the various *dhimmi* religions as being guilty of “reverse heresy,” shall make it all the easier to understand the attitude Islam has had towards enforcing its own orthodoxy. While, as stated before, there is no supreme religious authority, or absolute doctrinal canon within the Islamic faith, there is still a mindset towards assuring that there can never be too great of deviations from the mainstream, with passages from the Qur’an and the Hadith emphasizing the importance of this ideal lack of division within the “True Religion.” This in turn shall lead into an analysis of the works of Muslim theologians such as Ibn Hazm, whose critiques of “heterodox” Islamic sects further support such a notion as well as stressing how genuinely devout Muslims must avoid subscribing to views deemed too excessive or divisive when contrasted against the mainstream Sunni faith. To conclude, Islam, being the “religion of Truth” as well as the faith preached by the “Seal of the Prophets,” was essentially granted the monumental task of reprimanding the People of the Book for their perceived theological deviations, whilst simultaneously ensuring that their own faith would never have the opportunity to falter and undergo such horrific degeneration.

## **II. The Islamic Designation (or lack thereof) for the Heretic**

Despite the complication brought forth by the fact that there is no direct term for “heresy” or “heretic,” within Islam that is in any way comparable to Christianity, there are still several categories of religious deviation that possessed some degree of similarity. While the term that has both the earliest origins and one of the most notable comparisons is that of *bid’ah*, used in

reference to, “any doctrine or practice not attested in the time of the Prophet,”<sup>182</sup> observations make it clear that while this may not seem the most relevant, it is in actuality the synonym with the least amount of genuine aptitude behind its usage. This stems from the fact that the majority of theological disagreements that classify as *bid'ah* (roughly translating as “innovation,”) are not, “due to any purpose of rebelling against [the Prophet] but have arisen through some kind of confusion.”<sup>183</sup> Therefore, those guilty of *bid'ah* are most often not religious dissenters seeking to challenge or overthrow the mainstream authority, but are instead genuinely devout Muslims who are unintentionally guilty of adding onto the already perfect religion.

The unintentional nature of these deviations somewhat lessens the severity of their occurrence. Rather than falling under the harsher label of “heretic,” those “innovators” that are guilty of *bid'ah* would have often been seen as giving into falsehood out of unintended ignorance rather than sacrilegious malice, making their forgiveness much more accessible after the proper theological education has been provided. The concept is subsequently a perfect example of the somewhat more lenient view Islam has towards the overall concept of “heresy” when contrasted against the Christian framework. While it is still an issue that needs to be addressed thoroughly and punctually should it ever get out of hand, innovations considered *bid'ah* is, for the most part, relatively harmless. That being said, Lewis makes it quite clear that the terms of *bid'ah* and “heresy” are, “far from being exact equivalents,”<sup>184</sup> with the same mindset applying to other samples from Islamic terminology.

In a similar vein to the implications put forth by *bid'ah*, most other terms that can be loosely translated as “heresy” are often anything but perfect synonyms, with several possessing considerably lesser degrees of seriousness behind their usage. This stems from the fact that, with

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>183</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. “Bid'a.”

<sup>184</sup> Lewis, “Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in Islam,” 53.

many such categories, the attitude towards and actions taken against these deviators are often nowhere as severe as they would be for those guilty of “heresy.” In the case of those accused of “innovations,” serious action would only ever be taken in the event that their “innovations” proved, “excessive, persistent, and aggressive,” with the worst case scenarios usually being nothing more than something resembling a sanctioned quarantine, followed by theological admonition, should it even be deemed a necessity.<sup>185</sup> A similar attitude is applied towards the comparable concept of *ghuluww* (theological excess) owing to the fact that, within the broader spectrum of Islamic intellectualism, “a certain amount measure of diversity of opinion is harmless, and even beneficial”<sup>186</sup> to the individual’s spiritual wellbeing, as well as that of the community as a whole. While certain groups, such as the Shia *ghulat*, (whose glorification of the Imam Ali was considered too close to *shirk* (idolatry)) are intolerably excessive and must be excluded from mainstream Islam, any minor tidbits of theological differentiation between individual Muslims can be generally tolerated, and even encouraged for the most part.<sup>187</sup>

Owing to this casual toleration of minor theological divergences, and the simultaneous forgiveness of certain innovations (provided they are not too extreme) the terms that prove to be the closest counterparts to “heresy” refer not to transgressions occurring within the Islamic mainstream, but rather those concepts intended to guarantee that the beliefs of minority groups possess something of a second-class status and an influence that was never great enough to significantly challenge that of the majority. Subsequently, the closest comparisons to Christian “heresies” are not misdemeanors such as *bid’ah* or *ghuluww*, but rather that of the much more precise, yet much more ambiguous category of *zandaqa*. Defined by Lewis as a term that was originally used in exclusive reference to Manichaeism, the concept of *zandaqa* is one that

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 54.

expanded to the point that it spread far beyond defining one renegade religion. Rather than refer to any singular belief system, Lewis explains that *zandaqa* was instead “generalized to cover all holders of unorthodox, unpopular, and suspect beliefs.”<sup>188</sup> The fact that the concept of *zandaqa* underwent such simplification is monumental when discussing the view of “heresy” as it applies to the youngest Abrahamic faith.

The significance of the simplification of the concept of *zandaqa* stems from the effect it had on those whom were simultaneously outside the Muslim mainstream (i.e. smaller non-Sunni sects), as well as those that existed outside the realm of Islam as a whole but still received a certain degree of recognition (i.e. the followers of the *dhimmi* religions). While neither the People of the Book nor lesser Islamic schools of thought are perfectly synonymous with the Christian worldview of “heresies” (i.e. disobedient offshoots that knowingly and consensually follow incorrect dogma and can be identified by absolute theological authorities), they are quite comparable with the concept of *zandaqa*, since all of the applicable religions could perfectly fall under the category of “holders of unorthodox, unpopular, and suspect beliefs;” beliefs that could be, and often were, looked down upon by members of the often-Sunni majority. This becomes especially apparent after taking into account the fact that, unlike the Shia *ghulat* or those guilty of *bid’ah* (who would almost always face nothing worse than “being consigned by some theologian to Hellfire”), those labeled *zindiqs* would instead face the possibility of arrest, torture, and even execution, should they ever grew too overconfident with expressing their theological deviations away from the mainstream.<sup>189</sup>

The effect that such harsh consequences would have had on viewpoints categorized as *zandaqa* would have been monumental as so far as such dissenters would have been viewed by

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 55.

mainstream Islamic theology. While there was no formal system for rooting out perceived religious dissenters, nor any sort of supreme theological authority capable of issuing a blanket condemnation against those whose beliefs deviated too greatly from the established spectrum, this would have presented a means of dealing with questionable views in the event they ever grew too overconfident in expressing themselves. Those whose beliefs were outside the mainstream, such as the People of the Book, may have very well been tolerated, allowed to practice their religions as they saw fit, and even possess high-ranking positions within Islamic society. However, they could have just as easily been demoted to *zindiqs*, uprooted, suppressed, or even disposed of should their theological contrasts ever become too problematic for the Muslim majority. As a result, while Islam is not capable of directly condemning or persecuting non-Islamic religions and minority sects seen as too far outside mainstream teaching, it does have the capacity to marginalize and harshly suppress those who are ordinarily tolerated, but could be seen as forgetting their place and becoming too uppity in their contradicting the doctrines of the true faith.

With these points in mind, what stands out as the most notable is the fact that the Islamic derision of the flaws possessed by religions capable of possessing the label of *zandaqa*, be they Muslim or otherwise, stems from one primary aspect: their tendency for division and breaking up into sects. As discussed within the Qur'an, one of the benefits Islam has when compared to any and all other faiths, both monotheistic and idolatrous, is the fact that it possessed a Qur'an that was, "easy to understand – in [Muhammad's] own language,"<sup>190</sup> was a religion that had been, "perfected,"<sup>191</sup> and was "consistent and draws comparisons,"<sup>192</sup> with its revelations. Apart from these observations related to the new faith's sacred text, what is presented as most important is

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<sup>190</sup> The Qur'an, 44:58.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 5:4.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 39:23.

the fact that Islam possesses adherents that were, at least in theory, intentionally and strictly segregated apart from, “those who have divided their religion and broken up into factions,”<sup>193</sup> with a strong emphasis being made that they should, “not take the Jews and the Christians as allies.”<sup>194</sup> This theological segregation supposedly stems from the fact that they are, “allies only to each other,”<sup>195</sup> and therefore untrustworthy and unreliable. Despite this apparently harsh attitude towards faiths acknowledged as being their spiritual sisters, observations made within the Qur’an, as well as various other primary and secondary sources, makes it clear that such intense proscriptions against minorities like the People of the Book were not always present within Islamic belief, at least during the earlier years of its existence.

### **III. Early Quranic Views Towards the People of the Book**

During the earliest years of the Islamic religion, it would have not been looked upon as a new faith, but rather as a restoration of monotheism as a whole, a restoration that would have been intentionally pluralistic in its design towards similar religions. Far from being the view of one or two scholars, this attitude of simplified religious supremacy applying to a general concept of monotheism rather than just the faith preached by Muhammad is present within the Qur’an itself. Various verses support the notion that, instead of following a singular creed, the earliest Muslims subscribed “to a statement that is common to [them] all,” that, “[they] worship God alone,” and “ascribe no partner to him,”<sup>196</sup> with one of the most ideal examples present in *surah* 21 (Al-Anbya/The Prophets):

Have [the Meccans] chosen to worship other gods instead of Him?  
Say, ‘Bring your proof. This is the Scripture for those who are with

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 6:159.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, 5:51.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 5:51.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 3:64.

me and the scripture for those who went before me.’ But most of them do not recognize the truth, so they pay no heed.’ We never sent any messenger before you [Muhammad] without revealing to him: ‘There is no god but Me, so serve Me.’ And they say, ‘The Lord of Mercy has taken offspring for himself.’ May He be exalted! No! They are only His honored servants: they do not speak before He speaks and they act by His command.<sup>197</sup>

This passage originates from a Meccan surah, all of which were revealed during the earlier years of Muhammad’s ministry. During this period, the Prophet’s primary theological objective would not have been the establishment of a new monotheistic faith that was somehow intended to challenge the old, but rather a general combatting of the polytheistic idol worship practiced in Arabia at the time, as well as an overall sense of encouraging social reform. The passage’s significance stems from the fact that, rather than establishing Muhammad’s new religion as absolutely authentic in its design, it instead initiates a general promotion for all followers of monotheism, thereby accommodating any faith possessive of such a singular cosmology.

The reasoning behind this broadly pluralistic nature stems from the evolution underwent by the term “Muslim” during Muhammad’s own lifetime. As discussed by Fred M. Donner, there is ample evidence to suggest that, in the days of the Prophet, those underneath him would not have been categorized as “Muslims,” but under the much more general term of “Believers.” While this distinction might seem minimal, its importance is monumental when understanding Islam’s historical attitude towards beliefs that exist outside of the mainstream, both Muslim and otherwise, beliefs that could be categorized as *zandaqa* should they ever prove too uppity against the recognized religious authority. Donner explains that since, “in the Qur’an, ‘Muslim’ basically means monotheist,”<sup>198</sup> those within Muhammad’s movement, be they Jewish, Christian, or of another monotheistic faith, would have not been expected (or automatically required) to convert

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 21:24-26.

<sup>198</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 204.

to a new religion. This was owing to the fact that, “as monotheists, they did not need to ‘convert’ to anything in order to become active participants in the community.”<sup>199</sup> Unlike those who had abandoned Arab paganism and would have been expected to follow the most recent of God’s divine revelations (i.e. the Qur’an), the other monotheists were already seen to be following divinely inspired commandments and scriptures. This lenience towards the monotheistic faiths meant that, “Believing Jews could follow the injunction of the Torah and Christians the injunctions of the Gospels”<sup>200</sup> without much trouble. As opposed to the enforcement of a strictly “Islamic” worldview, this generally monotheistic vibe and the subsequent attitude of limited religious pluralism that came with it would have been quite common during Muhammad’s lifetime, especially during the early years of the Believers movement.

This attitude towards monotheistic religious freedom stemmed from the fact that, rather than be seen as members of different faiths, the Jews, Christians, Magians, enigmatic “Sabians,” and future Muslims within Muhammad’s gathering would have not been segregated apart from one another during his life, or at least not during the earlier years of his prophetic career. Instead of being split up and segregated into different socio-economic categories, (some holding a more respectable status than others), all of these groups would have been looked upon as members of a much broader monotheistic community: that of the “Believers.” When reviewing the above passages, such theological uniformity is made quite clear through the reassurance that, “the [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians – those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds,” have nothing to fear if they are indeed genuine in their beliefs, since they shall all receive fair judgment from the Almighty upon the Day of Resurrection and be

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 87.



allowed entry into Paradise.<sup>201</sup> Such an attitude of religious liberalism stemmed not only from the shared theological views held by these faiths (i.e. their mutual subscription to *tawhid*), but from the physical evidence they had of legitimacy in the form of their sacred texts.

When discussing the People of the Book, the easiest way of determining whether or not a religion potentially qualifies for membership among their exclusive ranks can be ascertained through the existence of physical copies of scriptures. Such texts perfectly fall under the definition of the “proof” requested by Muhammad, no matter the tradition from which they originate. Rather than supplanting the previous beliefs and scriptures, the arrival of the Qur’an was intended to complement them, while simultaneously restoring and completing the revelations that had been previously delivered to mankind by the earlier prophets. When discussing the “proof” of his religion’s legitimacy in the above passage, Muhammad is clear that, “this is the Scripture for those who are with me and the scripture for those who went before me,”<sup>202</sup> owing to the fact that instead of being a stand-alone text, the Qur’an is the latest chapter and grand finale in a millennia long divinely authored series, whose previous installments include the Torah,<sup>203</sup> the Psalms,<sup>204</sup> and the Gospels.<sup>205</sup> Apart from being divinely penned scriptures brought to different peoples throughout the ages, what stands out the most is the fact that the legitimacy of each text stems from the words of both its predecessors and its successors.

This degree of consistency is essential when comprehending the relationship between the sacred texts of the People of the Book and the Qur’an. Rather than any one book holding theological supremacy over the others, all of these scriptures are considered different chapters of

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<sup>201</sup> The Qur’an, 2:62; 5:69; 22:17.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 21:24.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 3:3; 7:157.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 4:163; 17:55; 21:105.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 3:3; 5:46; 48:29.

the same divinely penned, “Source of Scripture,”<sup>206</sup> each reaffirming the relatively simple and straightforward message that, “there is no god but Me, so serve Me.”<sup>207</sup> Such agreement means that each text would have to be just as authentic as the last. If so much as one ended up being inauthentic, then they would all have be nothing more than false and erroneous fictions. Furthermore, the fact that the monotheistic faiths present in the time of the Prophet would have been seen worshipping the same deity and adhering to beliefs from different parts of the same “Source of Scripture,”<sup>208</sup> all but guarantees that they must possess at least some degree of legitimacy when contrasted against the new revelations given to Muhammad. This in turn guarantees them each a place of their own within the community.

Far from being one distinct interpretation, this viewpoint is shared by other scholars on the subject. William Montgomery Watt explains to his readers that the only explicit thing “Islam would never tolerate was a practice or idea that obviously contradicted the belief that ‘there is no god but God,’” meaning that while, “idols, for example, had to be rigorously destroyed,”<sup>209</sup> there was no qualm towards the notion of different monotheistic religions all coexisting within the same community. Such views would have been further supported by the fact that the Qur’an, “had all along insisted that its message was compatible with that of the previous prophets.”<sup>210</sup> Rather than being looked down upon for having divided into sects, these Believers would have all (at least initially) been seen as smaller pieces of the larger group, worshipping the same God, reading the same book(s), and following the same commandments. Such compatibility not only had an effect on establishing Islam’s own legitimacy via a shared lineage with the other

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 43:4.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 21:25.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 43:4.

<sup>209</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 227.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 115.

Abrahamic religions; it allowed for an attitude of interfaith coexistence that remained in place long after Muhammad's passing.

As demonstrated within the Qur'an, as well as the biographies penned by Watt and Donner, rather than condemn the quality of its predecessors, Islam's entire validity as a religion relies on the previous monotheistic faiths. Passages from the earlier Meccan *surahs* go into clear and precise detail as to how the religions of the People of the Book have had a direct effect on the revelations of Muhammad. Rather than serve as a promotion of Muhammad's revelations over those of other faiths, the Qur'an confirms the legitimacy of all Abrahamic religions, while emphasizing the presence of undeniable evidence in the form of scripture. Such consistency is confirmed through the teachings of previous prophets such as Jesus, who would have been sure to tell their disciples that, "I am sent to you by God, confirming the Torah that came before me and bringing good news of a messenger to follow me whose name will be Ahmad."<sup>211</sup> This in turn provides absolute reassurance that the old faiths and this new one would both have a part to play in the still-forming community of these "Believers."

This attitude of recognizing the legitimacy of previous monotheistic religions had quite an effect on the evolution of the Prophet's ministry. As discussed by Donner, the view that Islam was the latest in a long series of revelations caused Muhammad to seek coexistence with other monotheistic religions, rather than attempt to supplant or suppress them. Such coexistence is most notable in the immediate aftermath of the *Hijrah* in 620 CE, wherein the Prophet arrived at Medina and established relations with monotheistic communities already in place, most notably the Jewish tribes inhabiting the city. When commenting on early Islamic documents such as the Constitution of Medina, Donner cites passages that state, "The Jews of the tribe of 'Awf are a people [*umma*] with the Believers; the Jews have their *din* [law?] and the *muslimun* have their

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<sup>211</sup> The Qur'an, 61:6.

*din*,”<sup>212</sup> confirming his presumptions that, at the least, “some of Medina’s Jews made an agreement with Muhammad in which they were recognized as being part of the *umma* or community of Believers,”<sup>213</sup> without converting to Islam. Historians such as Said Amir Arjomand are in agreement with Donner, explaining that, “the lasting effect of the constitutional recognition of the Jews’ religion was the institution of religious pluralism in Islam.”<sup>214</sup> Although the term *muslimun* is quite clearly an exclusive reference to Believers that would have followed the proclamations of Muhammad and the teachings in the Qur’an, it does not detract from the provided evidence confirming the presence of multiple religions coexisting within the early Islamic community, rather than any universal and uniform theological gathering.

After having reviewed the sources in question, it becomes quite apparent that the early period of Muhammad’s ministry was one of unquestionable religious coexistence. Rather than be divided up into different social categories based on their differing religions and sects, each and every member of this early community of “Believers” would have had an equal part to play, and because of their universal monotheism, would have not been required to convert to Islam upon their entry, regardless of whether they were Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, or of the “Sabians.” That being said, despite this level of religious coexistence occurring within the early community of Believers, the works of both Watt and Donner make it clear that this state of equality would not have remained universally consistent. During the later years of the Prophet’s ministry, those non-Muslim monotheists that previously held an equal status within the community underwent something of a demotion, primarily owing to an increase in political and theological aggression between the community of the Believers and those separate from it. This

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<sup>212</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 72-73.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>214</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad’s Acts of Foundation of the ‘Umma,”” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2009): 560.

increase in aggression marked the beginning of the end to any degree of equality that had existed between the newly christened Muslims and minorities that held the People of the Book status.

#### **IV. The Demotion of the People of the Book From “Believers” to *Dimmah***

An analysis of evidence cited from the Qur’an and elsewhere demonstrates the reasons Islam has had for condemning the division between different religious sects as a whole, as well as clarify the manner in which the term “Muslim” was gradually narrowed down in the years following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. From that point on, it will become clear that this shrinkage was intended as a means of promoting those who subscribed to Quranic law above other groups that would henceforth hold something of a secondary stature. While those among this new categorization of *dhimmah* would have received a special recognized status as “protected peoples” and would have almost always been held in greater respect than followers of polytheistic religions, members of both categories would henceforth be seen as being beneath their Muslim brethren.

This level of segregation becomes apparent while analyzing later sections of the Qur’an that put more attention on the theological quality of Islam’s predecessors. When describing the People of the Book, various passages from the Qur’an possess something of a two-sided attitude while discussing the perceived moral character of these religious minorities. While said passages are more than willing to offer praise to followers of *dhimmi* religions for their theological authenticity, others have no qualm with chastising them for their apparent shortcomings, with one of the most apparent examples present in *surah* 5 (Al-Ma’idah/The Feast):

If [the People of the Book] had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and below: some of them are on the right course, but many of them – how evil it is what they do!

Messenger, proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord – if you do not, then you will not have communicated His message – and God will protect you from people. God does not guide those who defy him. Say, ‘People of the Book, you have no true basis [for your religion] unless you uphold the Torah, the Gospel and that which has been sent down to you from your Lord,’ but what has been sent down to you [Prophet] from your Lord is sure to increase many of them in their insolence and their defiance: do not worry about those who defy [God]. For the [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians – those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds – there is no fear: they will not grieve.<sup>215</sup>

This passage originates from a Medinan *surah*, all of which were revealed in the period following the Prophet’s exile from Mecca in 620 CE and are notable for possessing rhetoric towards the People of the Book that is much more exact (and much more critical) when compared to *surahs* of Meccan origin. While this passage was revealed during a later period in the Prophet’s ministry, its significance comes not only from the aggressive nature it shows towards the other monotheistic religions, but from the manner in which it demonstrates the slow but steady demotion the followers of these faiths were undergoing, wherein they devolved from being fellow “Believers” to “protected peoples” and religious minorities who were of notably lesser standing than those who would eventually be referred to as “Muslims.”

When comparing this decline in religious equality between the Believers and other monotheistic faiths to the passage from *surah* 5, it becomes apparent that the reason for such demotion is directly tied to the theological incongruities the People of the Book had when contrasted against the views of early Muslims (i.e. those following the revelations of the Qur’an). When discussing the concept of the “Believer” as referring to anyone within Muhammad’s gathering who subscribed to monotheism, Donner explains how, in the later years of the Prophet’s ministry, “the term *muslim* underwent a kind of shrinkage,” wherein it would only

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<sup>215</sup> The Qur’an, 5:66-69.

refer to, “those monotheists who followed Quranic law and no longer to Jews and Christians.”<sup>216</sup> Such a change directly correlated with an increasingly militaristic attitude occurring within Muhammad’s movement as a whole, as well as earlier conflicts that had occurred between the Believers and exterior monotheistic communities during the decade spent in Medina. These conflicts not only affected the Islamic view towards their sister faiths in the years following its expansion beyond Arabia; it resulted in all members of non-Muslim monotheistic religions undergoing a theological demotion that would remain in effect for centuries to come.

This change in attitude towards the religions of the People of the Book most notably presented itself during Muhammad’s final years in Medina. When discussing this period, Watt makes it clear that despite their alliance with the Believers and the fact that “the Jews of Medina had no sufficient knowledge of the Jewish religion and scriptures,”<sup>217</sup> they still possessed enough religious education to realize that Muhammad’s preaching was incompatible with the Torah. Consequently, they more often than not “used their knowledge of the Old Testament to criticize Muhammad’s claim that the Qur’an was the speech of God.”<sup>218</sup> When confronted with the most apparent theological differentiations between his faith and that of his Jewish neighbors, Muhammad was forced to come to the conclusion that it was the traditions of the Jews that were erroneous rather than his own, hence the notion that, while, “some of” the People of the Book, “are on the right course,” most are faltering in their beliefs.<sup>219</sup> Since agreeing with their points would be disproving the validity of the Qur’an as the word of God, (as well as his own validity as a prophet), the only acceptable solution for Muhammad would have been, “to show that the

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<sup>216</sup> Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 204.

<sup>217</sup> Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, 98.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>219</sup> The Qur’an, 5:66.

differences were due to deviations on the part of the Jews.”<sup>220</sup> This in turn means that Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslim monotheists were practicing a flawed religion that was only partially accurate, consequently forfeiting any right they would have otherwise had to be counted amongst Muhammad’s following as Believers.

The long-term consequences of these disagreements (be they political or religious in nature) were twofold: not only did they lead to aggressive hostilities between the Believers and exterior monotheistic communities (to the point that one tribe, the Banu Qurayzah, was completely annihilated);<sup>221</sup> it resulted in a much harsher critique of the theological contrasts between Islamic and Judeo-Christian belief, no matter how large or small. Owing to the fact that they were not seen as separate religions, but earlier practitioners of the same “religion of Abraham,” as Muslims, those amongst the People of the Book would have not been viewed as members of different belief systems, but instead followers of a singular genuine faith who had cast it aside in favor of their own innovations and views that often fell dangerously close to *shirk*. Their willingness to change what had been revealed to them by God Himself meant that many amongst the Jews were now “the most hostile to the believers,”<sup>222</sup> and many amongst the Christians were guilty of having “defied God,”<sup>223</sup> through their belief in the Trinity, and the divine parentage of Christ, even though, “there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics.”<sup>224</sup> This willingness for such horrific innovations suggests that instead of being seen as mere infidels, those amongst the People of the Book who have detracted from correct scripture and correct belief are guilty of what can only be described as a “reverse-heresy.” While they willingly and knowingly deviated away from the authentic religion in favor of their own

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<sup>220</sup> Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, 115.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

<sup>222</sup> The Qur’an, 5:82.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, 5:72.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, 5:82.



additions and alterations, their actions have occurred prior to the coming of Muhammad rather than afterwards, necessitating his arrival in the first place.

This willingness of the People of the Book to deviate from divine revelation and deny theological truth even after, “Our Messenger comes to you now,” for the purpose of “making things clear for you,”<sup>225</sup> is the precise reason for the later condemnation and critique they receive in many of the Medinan *surahs*. Since, “God does not guide those who defy Him,”<sup>226</sup> their failure to remain consistent with the later revelations and disagree with the preaching of Muhammad demonstrates their lack of any sort of genuine faith. This in turn demonstrates that not only have they lost favor with the Almighty; for their insolence, they have been deprived of any true coexistence with Islam that they might have otherwise possessed. However, this does not mean that they were entirely stripped of a place within the overall Muslim community. While they are no longer recognized as a part of the absolute “religion of Truth,” or even on an equal footing with it, Arjomand makes it clear that Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, “Sabians,” and other monotheists will still be judged fairly come the Day of Resurrection and will still possess a recognized status wherein, “as so long as they abandoned any forms of hostile activity Muhammad allowed, them to live in Medina unmolested,”<sup>227</sup> not as genuine “Believers,” but as second-class religious minorities known as *dhimmah*.

While they no longer possessed a level of recognition equivalent to complete inclusion in the Muslim community, the *dhimmah* still had a societal standing that was quite favorable when compared to the treatment of other groups such as pagans and idolaters. When discussing the status of the *dhimmah*, Bat Ye’or explains that, unlike early Christian heresies, wherein it was made quite clear that there was only enough room, theologically speaking, for “one Holy

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 5:19.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 5:67.

<sup>227</sup> Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, 175.

Catholic and Apostolic Church,” that had the right to spread its message towards all of humanity, numerous Muslim rulers throughout history, have, “recognized a place – albeit an inferior one – for other revealed religions.”<sup>228</sup> While variations throughout history have made it impossible to definitively categorize the *dhimmi* system as being strictly “tolerant” or “oppressive,” in its usage, what is undeniable is the fact that said system allowed, “the *dhimmi* nations to survive albeit in a fossilized form,”<sup>229</sup> wherein they were not invulnerable to religious harassment and persecution, but were still recognized, possessed a limited degree of religious freedom, protected by the state, and, unlike those guilty of *shirk*, could not be forced to convert to Islam.<sup>230</sup>

Despite the relative religious tolerance presented within the *dhimmi* system, its attitude towards non-Muslim monotheists was one of at least some inequality, and arguably comparable to the aforementioned concept of *zandaqa*. Jews, Christians, and other minorities who had once carried the label of “Believers” received greater tolerance than any Christian heresy had by the proto-orthodox church and were still allowed to worship as they saw fit and maintain their own communities (provided they “pay the *jizya* promptly and agree to submit.”)<sup>231</sup> That being said, the theological demotion they had undergone in the later years of Muhammad’s ministry helped make the line between a *dhimmi* and a *zindiq* thinner than ever before, especially after Islam’s expansion beyond the Arabian Peninsula, wherein the Muslim conquerors now had authority over large populations of non-Muslim citizenry. Most notably, those living as *dhimmah* could, despite their status as protected religious minorities, still be attacked, persecuted, and lose their houses of worship if any were considered to have, “exceeded their rights.”<sup>232</sup> While *dhimmah*

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<sup>228</sup> Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*, (London: Associated University Press, 1985), 132.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>231</sup> The Qur’an, 9:29.

<sup>232</sup> Ye’or, *The Dhimmi*, 58.

were neither “heretics,” nor “holders of unorthodox, unpopular, and suspect beliefs,”<sup>233</sup> by default and were granted limited religious freedom under Islamic rule, the status that they possessed was almost never synonymous with religious equality. Furthermore, the perceived committal they had towards their “reverse-heresies” meant that their limited rights could be rescinded just as easily as they had been provided should they ever forget their place or prove too uppity against the “religion of Truth.”

Rather than solely affect the Jews and Christians within Muhammad’s following, the discovery of the “reverse-heresies” committed by the *dhimmah* would have simultaneously affected the newly christened Muslims. Upon “discovering” these “reverse-heresies” that the earlier monotheists were guilty of having committed, those following Muhammad were now tasked with making sure that the same fate would never befall their own religion, while fighting, “those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day,” and do not, “obey the rule of justice;”<sup>234</sup> those who refuse to submit and recognize the error of their ways. It is for these exact reasons that the passage from *surah* 5 so vehemently reminds the People of the Book that, while there are some amongst them who remain genuine in their beliefs, they “have no true basis [for their religion] unless [they] uphold the Torah, the Gospel, and that which has been sent down to [them] from [their] Lord.”<sup>235</sup> While they are still authentic in their partial scriptural accuracy, subscription to *tawhid*, and shared prophetic descent from Abraham, they are simultaneously guilty of shying away from the genuine religion of Abraham, thereby necessitating the coming of Muhammad in the first place. Consequently, when addressing his own gathering, Muhammad, as well as his political successors and all who follow his religion,

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<sup>233</sup> Lewis, “Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in Islam,” 55.

<sup>234</sup> The Qur’an, 9:29.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 5:68.

must be sure to, “proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord,”<sup>236</sup> and ensure its eternal consistency, lest the restored religion of Abraham risk succumbing to the same errors as its predecessors and lose any trace of its authenticity.

### **V. Maintaining Perfection within the “Perfected Religion”**

A further analysis of various primary and secondary sources will demonstrate the manner in which, after establishing itself as a religion in its own right and exposing the “reverse heresies” committed by the *dhimmah*, Islam was presented with the task of enforcing its own orthodoxy upon its subscribers, now considered the only proper “Believers.” While it was often the case that a degree of innovation or difference in belief between individual Muslims was tolerated, this is not to say that all contrasting attitudes towards religion were automatically embraced. In order to maintain the designation it possessed as “the religion of Truth,” intended “to show that it is above all [other] religions,”<sup>237</sup> as well as Muhammad’s proclaimed status as the “Seal of the Prophets,” the faith not only needed to ascertain its theological authority over its erroneous predecessors; it had to be ready to combat any movements within itself that too greatly deviate from an acceptable religious viewpoint, the closest equivalent of a genuine Islamic “heresy.” While Bernard Lewis makes it clear there is no real equivalent for “heresy” as in something that is “contrary to the truth as authoritatively defined,” and “condemned by a proper ecclesiastical authority,”<sup>238</sup> an analysis of the orthodox reaction to groups outside of the Sunni mainstream makes it clear that too great of deviations were more often than not heavily discouraged. Much like the views towards the *dhimmi* religions (and the rationale behind their

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 5:67.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 48:28.

<sup>238</sup> Lewis, “Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in Islam,” 57.

demotion), the Islamic distrust of too great of unorthodox views within their own faith are no less prominent, so as to prevent casual *bid'ah* from evolving into direct *zandaqa*.

Rather than be the opinion of a few academics, the Islamic attitude towards inner religious division can be observed within the faith's own sacred texts. The more general of passages from the Qur'an, such as those ordering the Prophet to, "have nothing with [those who have divided their religion and broken up into factions],"<sup>239</sup> and to, "hold fast onto God's rope all together; do not split into factions,"<sup>240</sup> could be seen as a criticism of all early Believers, rather than just the future Muslims. At the same time, similar quotes taken from other texts are much more precise in their condemnation of division within Islam. Most notably, the following citation from the *Sunan Abi Dawud* makes the fate of those who break off into sects painfully clear:

The Prophet (PBUH) said: The Jews were split up into seventy-one or seventy-two sects; and the Christians were split up into seventy one or seventy-two sects; and my community will be split up into seventy-three sects... seventy two of them will go to Hell and one of them will go to Paradise, and it is the majority group... There will appear among my community people who will be dominated by desires like rabies which penetrates its patient."<sup>241</sup>

The notoriety of this passage stems from the fact that not only does it give a clear and precise answer as to how many variations of heresy Muslims are predicted to break off into, it makes it quite clear that, amongst any divisions that occur, the only sect with a guarantee of salvation will be the largest of these seventy-three (i.e. Sunni). As previously stated, Islam is neither in possession of an exact term for "heresy," nor a theological authority capable of explicitly uprooting movements that diverge away from the mainstream. At the same time, despite this lack of theological authority, passages such as these make it clear that the mainstream still has the

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 6:159.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 3:103.

<sup>241</sup> "Sunan Abi Dawud 4596-4597," *Sunnah.com – Sayings and Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad*. <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42> (accessed March 1, 2017).

capacity to react against the divergent in a way that not only discourages their spread, but also reminds them of the inevitable fate awaiting *zindiqs*.

Far from being confined to one obscure Hadith, the mindset of there being a singular supreme creed within Islam itself whose followers possess the exclusive privilege of entering *Jannah* instead of *Jahannam* is present throughout several examples taken from Muslim scholarship. Interestingly enough, despite this agreement, there is an arguable lack of consistency regarding how many different heresies Islam will be forced to deal with during its own existence. Although this estimation of there being exactly seventy-two heretical Muslim sects stems directly from the word of the Prophet Muhammad, it is nowhere near the only estimation. Later theologians such as Ibn Hazm (994-1064 CE) put forth the claim that there are, at the least, five distinct sects of the “community of Islam,” each divided into a number of smaller sects.<sup>242</sup> While Ibn Hazm’s views stand by the belief that the only genuine form of Islam is the mainstream, works such as his *Heterodoxies of the Shiites* are noteworthy for the manner in which it thoroughly details and describes the “erroneous” sects, so as to prevent genuinely devout Muslims from accidental subscription.

Throughout the course of *Heterodoxies of the Shiites*, Ibn Hazm makes it clear that, “the greatest difference in opinion among the *Sunnites* prevails in questions of religious practice,” and “a few particulars of religious doctrine,” while the other four sects (the Mu’tazilites, the Murji’ites, the Shi’ites, and the Kharijites) contrast the Islamic mainstream in a variety of manners, both great and small.<sup>243</sup> Regardless of how their views differ from the mainstream, whether they syncretize with Christianity to profess “Unbelief and the doctrine of the Trinity,”<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Israel Friedlander ed., “The Heterodoxies of the Shiites as Defined by Ibn Hazm,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 28 (1907): 28-29.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

incorrectly presume that “the Imamate is confined to the descendants of Ali,”<sup>245</sup> or are discriminated by special teachings which actually stand outside the doctrine of the Sunnites,<sup>246</sup> the fact that they adhere to such special teachings makes them an incredible danger to the mainstream Muslim community. Apart from those within the Sunni community itself, who are still considered “adherents of truth,” all of the previously mentioned groups as well as their descendants are nothing more than “adherents of heresy.”<sup>247</sup> This is quite consistent with the earlier definition of *zandaqa* provided by Lewis, where he makes it clear that “the professing Muslim who holds beliefs and follows practices contrary to the doctrines of Islam” is viewed in the most horrific manner, wherein he is “to be regarded as an apostate and an infidel.”<sup>248</sup> Despite the intense danger created by those sects so eager to deviate away from the mainstream, Ibn Hazm reassures his readers that their exposure is actually quite simple.

Not unlike early orthodox Christian opponents of heresy such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Ibn Hazm’s critique towards the heterodoxies of these Muslim “adherents of heresy” does not stem from blithe insistence of theological superiority, but rather through the careful analysis and exposure of their flaws when contrasted against the authentic school of thought. Most particularly, when lamenting over the innovations of which the non-Sunni schools are guilty, Ibn Hazm makes it quite clear that “none of these sects care in the least for logical demonstration” of their faiths’ validity, with the only “proof” of any supposed authenticity being the “claim of inspiration, impudence, and the capacity to lie openly.”<sup>249</sup> In contrast to this blithe lack of evidence, the solely authentic sect of Islam makes its legitimacy quite clear, especially after it is taken into account that “the religion of Allah is open, with no hidden meaning in it, public, with

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>248</sup> Lewis, “Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in Islam,” 56.

<sup>249</sup> Friedlander ed., “The Heterodoxies of the Shiites as Defined by Ibn Hazm,” 35.

no secret behind it, all of it logical demonstrations, with no laxity about it.”<sup>250</sup> Rather than hide its error behind vague mysteries or secret knowledge, Sunni Islam’s willingness to remain open in explaining its beliefs is the only real evidence it needs. While the apparent ease of segregating the true from the false makes it questionable as to why these heretical schools would have any adherents in the first place, Ibn Hazm makes it clear that their means of recruitment are just as questionable as the doctrines they profess.

While his explanations of how these “heretical” sects differ from the mainstream and his insistence that true Muslims must “be on [their] guard against any opinion,” whose “truth is not distinct,”<sup>251</sup> would appear to debunk the legitimacy of such denominations, Ibn Hazm is quick to clarify why such followings exist in the first place. Most notably, Ibn Hazm explains that in the case of sects such as the Shiites or the Sufis, the reasons behind their innovations would not have not only stemmed from a desire to rebel against Islam, but out of a desire to right earlier wrongs that had been committed against them. This is most apparent in the case of the (Persian) Shiite “rebels,” many of whom were not only resentful over the loss of their empire to the Arabs but aghast over the fact that their conquerors “possessed the least dignity of all nations.”<sup>252</sup> These rebels consequently saw fit to “entrap Islam by trickery,” by winning over otherwise devout Muslims “with Shiite inclinations” through feigned affection towards Ali.<sup>253</sup>

This notion of the ways in which the Shiites and other “heretical” sects differ from the Sunni is the exact reason why they pose such a colossal danger to Muslim belief. While the Qur’an makes it clear that “there is no compulsion in religion,”<sup>254</sup> and, for the most part, the casual divergence in belief outside of the mainstream is tolerated, there must still be a means of

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>254</sup> The Qur’an, 2:256.



enforcing the superiority of the correct over the erroneous. This is where the concept of *zandaqa* becomes most applicable when compared to the views of Ibn Hazm. While non-Sunni traditions within Islam may have very well been allowed to adhere to their beliefs, much like the *dhimmah*, they would have existed within a secondary realm of recognition, to the point that if they ever too greatly challenged the Sunni mainstream or threatened the spiritual wellbeing of those with correct beliefs they could easily be accused of *zandaqa*. Subsequently, they would have gone from mere holders of heterodox beliefs to apostates that could be actively persecuted by the state.

## **VI. Conclusions**

In light of the preceding analysis, it is quite clear that the Islamic view towards “heresy” is anything but simplistic. Apart from lacking any exact term for such within its lexicon, and any sort of clerical authority capable of actively suppressing movements outside of the mainstream, it becomes apparent that the Islamic view towards the “heretical” is not one that automatically condemns their existence. Rather, it is one that allows for movements that have been deemed unorthodox to exist alongside their Muslim brethren, provided they never grow too extreme in their beliefs, and recognize that the rights they have been granted can be rescinded just as easily should they ever prove too problematic. Rather than be confined to orthodox critiques of one or two bizarre offshoots, the closest comparable equivalent to heresy, *zandaqa*, is not only very broad in its definition; it can be applied to both Islam’s predecessors as well as its successors.

It is the broad nature of the category of *zandaqa* that permits Islam to enforce something of a theological canon, despite its lack of authorities or precise definition of heresy. Furthermore, the double-sided viewpoint not only applies to Islamic beliefs outside of the mainstream; it refers to those among the People of the Book who preceded the coming of Muhammad and hid “the

truth that they know,”<sup>255</sup> in favor of their own innovations. While the latter were once tolerated, allowed an equal status in the community as fellow Believers, and at least some will still “have their rewards with their Lord,”<sup>256</sup> the exposure of their horrific “reverse-heresies” has resulted in their demotion, wherein the *dimmah* could easily become *zindiqs* should they ever forget their place against the “religion of Truth.” The same mindset is applicable to those Islamic sects that exist outside of the Sunni mainstream; although the fact that “there is no compulsion in religion”<sup>257</sup> makes it impossible to forcibly convert them, too great of insolence could result in their own demotion to *zindiqs* and subsequent suppression, lethally if need be. Consequently, when confronting the “heretical,” Islam has had to simultaneously review both the past and the future, not only to prevent relapse into the same errors as its predecessors, but also to guarantee that successive generations of true Believers not succumb to a similar fate.

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid, 2:146.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 3:199.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 2: 256.

### General Conclusions

Regardless of historical aggressions or conflicts that have occurred between the younger Abrahamic faiths throughout their respective histories, Christianity and Islam are, in many respects, two sides of the same coin. Apart from being mutually monotheistic and sharing a prophetic lineage with Judaism (with the respective additions of Jesus and Muhammad), both of these belief systems have made it clear that they are absolutely “universal” in their theology. Christians see themselves as being destined to spread “the good news to the whole creation,”<sup>258</sup> and make “disciples of all nations.”<sup>259</sup> Muslims see themselves as being destined to remind humanity that not only has God “sent a messenger to every community,”<sup>260</sup> since the days of Adam, but that “true religion, in God’s eyes,” always has been and always will be “*islam*: [devotion to Him alone],”<sup>261</sup> which Muhammad, being the Seal of the Prophets, has been tasked with fully restoring. Despite these numerous areas of theological commonality, what is most important to understand when comprehending their differing views towards the “heretical” was the shared Abrahamic lineage that these two faiths possess with one another.

Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad lived roughly six centuries apart from one another and started their followings in completely different regions of the Middle East. That being said, there exists at least one area of unquestionable consistency when comparing the Messiah with the Seal of the Prophets: neither considered themselves to be beginning a new religion. Neither Christianity nor Islam saw themselves as new faiths that had stubbornly seceded from their predecessors. Instead, they were each the direct (and solely authentic) descendent of the covenant that had been established during the time of the Old Testament. This in of itself is

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<sup>258</sup> Mk. 16:15 (NRSV).

<sup>259</sup> Mt. 28:19 (NRSV).

<sup>260</sup> The Qur’an, 16:36.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 3:19.

confirmed through their direct (and shared) descent from Abraham. The Pauline Epistles make the claim that “there is neither Jewish nor Gentile,”<sup>262</sup> and that all “those who believe” are “blessed with Abraham” to whom it was revealed “all the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.”<sup>263</sup> In the same sense, numerous verses from the Qur’an command the Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims within his gathering to “follow Abraham’s religion” seeing as how he “had true faith”<sup>264</sup> owing to the fact that he was neither a Jew nor a Christian” but “upright and devoted to God,” and “never an idolater.”<sup>265</sup> Regardless of any differences in exact wording, the fact remains that early Christians and Muslims would have both seen themselves as not starting something new, but continuing that which already was. With that in mind, they would have both been forced to not only back up the claims of their exclusive theological authenticity, but also see to the prevention of interior division so as to ensure the maintained perfection of their respective faiths, as well as ensure their continued survival.

As evidenced by the material covered within first portion of this project, the relationship between the Christian faith and the “heresies” that supposedly descended from it is one of both resounding complexity and extensive variety. While church doctrine makes the exact definition of the Christian “heretic” quite clear, reviewing the commentaries against and theological attitudes of Gnostic “heretics” shows that the line between these so-called “heresies” and the “orthodoxy” that opposed them was nowhere near set in stone. As evidenced by surviving Gnostic texts, such as those discovered at Nag Hammadi, many of their “heretical” beliefs were quite in line with their orthodox kin, with more than half of the sayings from the non-canonical

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<sup>262</sup> Galatians 3:28 (NRSV).

<sup>263</sup> Gal. 3:6-9; Gen. 12:3 (NRSV).

<sup>264</sup> The Qur’an, 3:95.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 3:67.

*Gospel of Thomas* tracing their origins to the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline Epistles.<sup>266</sup> These instances of textual consistency put forth the suggestion that the schism between the “heretical” and the “orthodox” Christians was much more gradual than the commentaries of “proto-orthodox” church fathers would ever think to suggest.

While there are, of course, numerous areas of differentiation between the gargantuan collection of beliefs that is Gnosticism and the singular creed of “proto-orthodox” Christianity (such as the conflict between Yaldabaoth and the “God of Truth,” or Christ’s solely ethereal nature versus his dual status as both God and Man), it would be incorrect to blithely refer to such divergences as being “heresies” as defined by the orthodoxy. The reviewed primary and secondary sources have made it apparent that the Gnostics were developing much of their doctrine and theology concurrently with the “proto-orthodoxy,” and the divergences of “heretics” often unintentionally assisted in the development of the canonical church opinions against them. At the same time, the Gnostics often altered their doctrine and scriptures based on their disagreements with this self-identified “orthodoxy.” While Gnostic authors and theologians responded to the “proto-orthodox” “heresies” in their own way (i.e. the metaphorical favoring of disciples such as St. James and Mary Magdalene over St. Peter, etc.), the faith’s legalization in 313 CE, and the development of the Nicene Creed in 325 CE all but guaranteed that the “one holy Catholic and Apostolic church” would win the day over the erroneous theological dangers presented by these heretics, with this in turn resulting in their gradual but inevitable extinction.

In the case of the Islamic faith, the project’s analysis of “heresy” proved somewhat difficult owing to the fact that the Islam, the self-identified “religion of Truth,” possessed no clear definition of what constituted a divergence in proper Muslim belief apart from its unquestionable condemnation of *shirk*. The same can be said for overall lack of hierarchical

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<sup>266</sup> Barnstone and Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas,” in *The Gnostic Bible*, 43.

clerical authority within the Muslim religion. While there are condemnations made towards those whose beliefs differ too greatly from the mainstream, it was never treated the same way as in Christianity. The New Testament made it clear that there would be “false teachers among you,” that will “secretly bring in destructive opinions”<sup>267</sup> and threaten the very existence of the church; the Islamic attitude towards such religious divergence is considerably less urgent. In regards to the above passage, Muslims would possess no real reason to worry. Since Muhammad is, “God’s messenger and the Seal of the Prophets,”<sup>268</sup> it would be theoretically impossible for any false prophet to arrive after his ministry. If such an event were to happen, this person would never be taken seriously, but rather be shunned, condemned, and possibly executed as both a blasphemer and a disbeliever. Furthermore, the absolute perfection of the Qur’an (being the direct word of God) and the lack of any sort of organized clergy makes this impossibility all the more apparent.

As a result of the impossibility of there being any false prophets arriving after the death of Muhammad and bringing inconsistent teachings, the Islamic attitude towards “heresy” was shown to be somewhat inclusive, at least more so than orthodox Christianity. At the worst, that which could be considered “heretical” is most often treated like a minor annoyance, whether it is towards non-Sunni Muslims such as the Shia, or towards the “reverse-heresies” of the People of the Book. While it is emphasized that those Jews who say “Ezra is the son of God,” and those Christians who say, “the Messiah is the son of God,” do not “[truly] believe in God and the Last Day,” and are “repeating what earlier disbelievers have said,” (effectively making them no better than the Meccan idolaters)<sup>269</sup> this is not to say that they have received a complete and unforgivable condemnation. Indeed, they are still accorded a certain degree of recognition

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<sup>267</sup> 2 Peter 2:1 (NRSV).

<sup>268</sup> The Qur’an, 33:40.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 9:30.

through the *dhimmi* system and their disbelief is almost never treated as a direct threat against the stability of the Islamic religion, but rather, as an error that could easily and ideally be remedied.

When it is said that heresy is not a “threat” against Islam, this is not to say that those who too greatly deviate were casually ignored. While it is made clear that disbelief, innovations, or “reverse-heresies” be they Muslim or otherwise, must be dealt with if they ever grow too extreme, the only ones who are genuinely at risk are solely their propagators. Physically, if they were to ever directly combat Muslims, it is made apparent that “God protects the believers while the disbelievers have no one to protect them,”<sup>270</sup> and the “religion of Truth” would always win the day. Spiritually, regardless of whether or not they are exposed, those who fail to recognize their errors or recant their disbeliefs will face divine judgment and be cast into Hell alongside “everyone who hindered good, was aggressive, caused others to doubt, and set up other gods.”<sup>271</sup> It is simultaneously made clear that, “your only duty is to convey the message” to disbelievers and “if they turn away”<sup>272</sup> of their own will, show no aggression towards Islam, and have “not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes”<sup>273</sup> then that shall be the end of it.

In the opening pages of this project, an answer was sought for the following question: “why is it that Christianity and Islam, two traditions that share a common prophetic ancestry, scriptural heritage, and mutual claims of exclusive validity, differ so greatly when confronting those offshoots considered to be “heretical,” with the former going out of its way to suppress “heresies” and the latter not even possessing an equivalent term?” Upon review, it has become clear that the reason for such differentiation is connected to the situation that each faith found itself in early on. For Christianity, the orthodoxy suppressed whatever “heresies,” had cropped

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid, 47:11.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 50:25.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, 3:20.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 60:7.

up, with those who proclaimed “a gospel contrary to the one we proclaimed to you,” being “accursed,” for seeking to “pervert the gospel of Christ,”<sup>274</sup> and threatening the church’s stability. Since Christianity was a minority religion that had undergone intermittent persecution, these fears were not without precedent; it was a situation wherein disunity would make the possibility of extinction all the more likely. Therefore the church combatted heresies through theological unity and consistency, thereby ensuring its survival. Islam on the other hand, had always been on top. While there was once a time when Muslims were held equal alongside other monotheistic “Believers,” the discovery of their “reverse-heresies” meant that the younger faith was now the solely authentic one. Although it would permit the continued existence of its older siblings, it simultaneously needed to remain superior, so as to prevent the potential repetition of such horrific theological errors.

After reviewing the means by which these Christianity and Islam have identified and confronted that considered to be heretical within their respective traditions, it has become apparent that, despite the differences in their reactions, there is at one area of consistency: the greatest danger within the “heretical,” is not the manner in which they differed from the mainstream, but the ways in which they compared. Consequently, it is no surprise that Christianity and Islam, each claiming to be the superior faith and coming from the same monotheistic tradition, adjusted their worldview so as to consider the other a heresy in its own right. At the same time, the events of their early histories caused each to address the other the way they would a heresy. At the end of the day, as long as those who do not subscribe to the true faith would, for the former, see the error of their ways and submit to orthodox authority or, for the latter, withhold from challenging the proper religion and remember their second-class status, they would almost always have nothing to fear.

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<sup>274</sup> Gal. 1:7-9 (NRSV).



### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the following individuals whose assistance with the research, preparation, revision, and defense of this study was essential: Associate Professor of History Edmund Michael Kern, Department of History, Lawrence University; Associate Professor of Religious Studies Martyn Smith, Department of Religious Studies, Lawrence University; McNaughton Rosebush Professor of Liberal Studies and Professor of Religious Studies Karen L. Carr, Department of Religious Studies, Lawrence University; Robert S. French Professor of American Studies and Professor of History Jerald Podair, Department of History, Lawrence University; Reference Librarian, Instruction Coordinator, and Associate Professor Gretchen M. Revie, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Lawrence University; Music Librarian and Associate Professor Antoinette Powell, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Lawrence University; Assistant Professor of Classics Adriana E. Brook, Department of Classics, Lawrence University.

This research was partially and indirectly supported via funds obtained through two monetary awards provided by Lawrence University of Appleton, Wisconsin: The E. Graham Waring Prize in Religious Studies (awarded May 2015) and The Brayton Junior Writing Prize for Excellence in History (awarded May 2016).

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